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12 SEEING RED

Quebec filmmaker Pascal Plante has made a bloodless horror film that will make you squirm in your seat. This is the story of *Les chambres rouges*.

PLUS! Two new Montreal-shot horror comedies dig up cinematic ideas about vampires (*Humanist Vampire Seeking Consenting Suicidal Person*), zombies (*We Are Zombies*), and what makes a film French Canadian.

by **ANDREA SUBISSATI AND SEAN PLUMMER**

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Rue Morgue speaks with the makeup maven behind Creature Cosmetics, Morbidly Beautiful, and LunatiCK Cosmetic Labs to discuss the budding independent industry that dares to mix beauty and horror.

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by **ANDREA SUBISSATI**

26 AMICUS RISING

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PLUS! New leadership spells a new direction for the revived Hammer Studios.

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NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

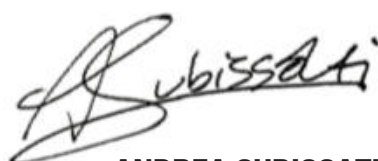
You've long opened these pages to read me prattle on about horror love and chosen family, finding your proverbial tribe and embracing your inner weirdo. Well, wretched reader, I'm about to cut that wussy shit out and, for once, talk about what divides us. In this issue, we tackle what is perhaps the most contentious horror-adjacent subject since someone first dared refer to a genre film as "elevated" (they're probably still in hiding, poor schmuck). Despite the blasphemies I've committed to the page here, from admitting my love of musical theatre to calling Martin Scorsese a boomer, there's a line I draw in the sand when it comes to this here magazine and it's a hill I'm willing to die on – we don't run true crime/serial killer stuff because *it is not horror*.

"But-but-but," cries my email inbox, "Norman Bates was inspired by Ed Gein! Henry (*Portrait of a Serial Killer*) was based on Henry Lee Lucas!" Examples abound of horror movies inspired by serial killers (and indeed, sadly, serial killers inspired by horror movies) but *Rue Morgue* doesn't deal in that. Horror is fiction, the work of imagination and artistry, an exercise of our grimmest fears and anxieties, and true crime is a historical account of awful things happening to real people. They're alike in many ways, but this difference is important.

"But-but-but," cries my inbox, "they're still confronting the reality of violence and trauma in the world! Plus, true crime is often even more fucked-up than fiction! What's wrong with enjoying that sort of thing?" Well guys, there's nothing wrong with enjoying that sort of thing. Go forth and gorge on the expansive and ever-growing glut of miniseries, podcasts, YouTube channels, social media channels, and blogs chronicling the terrible things we humans have inflicted on one another. I wish you Godspeed, without judgment! The fact that I won't run this stuff in *Rue Morgue* has nothing to do with its indisputable popularity and appeal – hell, if we were smart, Rodrigo and I would rename this mag *True Morgue* and capitalize on the fact that true crime is the hottest content in town at the moment. But we're less business savvy than we are passionate about the literary/cinematic/artistic genre, folks; it's just not what we do and, dammit, I'm getting sick of explaining why.

I'll just leave it to filmmaker Pascal Plante, who wrote and directed the breathtaking *Les chambres rouges* (a.k.a *Red Rooms*, see cover story) without having to worry about re-traumatizing the families of real-life victims, or cosmetologist Carrie Marcum of Notoriously Morbid cosmetics, who rebranded a Jack the Ripper-inspired line of makeup for the exact same concerns (see feature, p.20). I know this distinction seems moralistic and makes me sound like some puritanical Mother Superior who has the gumption to claim that a razor-fingered pedophile offing generations of his victims in their sleep is somehow more wholesome than an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries* and, trust me, I hate that. This is just one reason why I'm so delighted to feature *Les chambres rouges* this issue and take the opportunity to discuss this subject *Rue Morgue*-style – through the metaphors of powerful storytelling, since horror narratives are far more illustrative than anything I could pontificate on the subject. In my interview with Plante, we discuss the relationship between horror and true crime, and how his film tap dances around that all-important line. A masterclass in squirm-inducing dread, *Les chambres rouges* makes us feel uncomfortable about our proximity (real and imagined) to these sorts of stories, asking us (the way all horror asks us), how close is too close and how far is too far?

So whether you're a prison-letter-collecting serial-killer junkie or a binge listener of *My Favorite Murder*, this issue is for you – as close as it's gonna get, anyway. See you next year, weirdos!



ANDREA SUBISSATI
andrea@rue-morgue.com

Horror in Culture & Entertainment

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RUE MORGUE #215 would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of Kate McEdwards, Mitch Davis, and Al McMullan.

RUE MORGUE stands in solidarity with WGA and SAG-AFTRA. Without the labour of the writers and actors currently on strike, the media being covered here would not exist.

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Design by Shane Mills

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POST MORTEM

COMMENTS • QUESTIONS • CRITICISM



CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *HAUNTED* needs to be adapted. Read a lot of Palahniuk's work and that one in particular is my favourite piece of his.

@DOUGLASSAEWEN, VIA INSTAGRAM

I'VE BEEN A BIG FAN OF CHUCK PALAHNIUK since I was in my teens so it was a real treat to see him in my favourite magazine. I always thought some of his books were pretty dark but the new one sounds really twisted. I just got my hands on a copy, thanks *Rue Morgue*! P.S. Did you ever feature Clive Barker? I'm assuming yes but I'm a newbie, don't hate me!

PATRICK DOEGER, VIA EMAIL

Thanks Patrick, you will find plenty of Clive Barker throughout our back issue library but especially in RM#194, #179 and #41 – Ed.

HAVE Y'ALL DONE AN ARTICLE that speaks on the '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s B-movies that had good stories with potential but *bad* production and acting? They should be remade as opposed to the movies they remake nowadays (like the *Hal-loweens*... come on!). You could also write an article on films from the '30s that had potential and that should be remade. Your current article on AI made me think of that. Personally, I'd like to see *Squirm*, *Chopping Mall* or *Bad Taste* done with decent budgets.

CRYSTAL ANGELES, VIA EMAIL

HEY RODRIGO, thanks for *The Breach* and good to see the spread in the new issue. I really loved the old school practical effects and forgot how much I missed seeing them in movies. I also have to say that Slash's music was really impressive and I'm highly anticipating what you guys will do together. By the way, my wife and I were wondering if there will be a sequel to *The Breach*; the ending seemed to suggest more to the story. Thanks for the monsters!

JAMES AND ELLA GARCIA, VIA EMAIL

There are no current plans for a sequel but if that changes you will read it here first! – Ed.

BEST SHOW ON YOUTUBE is The Rewind Zone!!

@ANTHONYWHEELER2082, VIA YOUTUBE

READING THE FALL ISSUE of your scary interesting and visually gory magazine. Really enjoy taking a moment in my art studio and cracking the perfect binding of *Rue Morgue* and creating art and meeting customers.

CHARLES WEISS, ADDRESS WITHHELD



CAN'T WAIT TO RECEIVE AND READ [RM#214]! Been a subscriber since RM#10 and lifelong horror genre fanatic! Keep up the stellar commitment to all things horror!

@VICTOR.DESORDI, VIA INSTAGRAM

RE: "SYMPATHY FOR THE SEQUEL" on *Rue Morgue TV* – I was twelve when *Alien 3* came out and it totally blew my mind. I've wasted a lot of time and fun being stubbornly contrarian, but now that's passed and I'm still in love with this film.

The atmosphere is so gross, dark, glum, and hopeless. I love the funeral scene, and the way Ripley takes the helm with a bunch of convicts, who aren't all two-dimensional. It warms my heart to hear this film get some praise.

@SUNFLOWERBADGER, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: "SYMPATHY FOR THE SEQUEL" on *Rue Morgue TV* – Very insightful thoughts, Alex! Having [Ripley's] chosen family ripped away and having to face the one that she is trying to rid herself of is a great way of looking at this. I honestly like *Alien 3* more than *Aliens*. I just prefer the more grounded and weighty themes and characters here than the overblown cartoon character Marines that are all over Cameron's film.

@NICKMICHALAK, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: "ANATOMY OF A SCREAM" on *Rue Morgue TV* – My wife and I saw *Exorcist III* on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Bakersfield, California. That scene got a huge scream, with lots of nervous laughter afterwards. We both walked out of the movie really spooked. The movie has a way of getting under your skin, and the creeping dread is powerful. It's taken many years, but *Exorcist III* has gotten the praise it always deserved. Some of us loved it from the beginning.

BRIAN NICHOLS, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: "SYMPATHY FOR THE SEQUEL" on *Rue Morgue TV* – Great insight and commentary. This is what makes makes [*Rue Morgue TV*] the best source of horror info/commentary on the planet, likely in the universe. Thanks for such a great resource.

@JOEPORTER5972, VIA YOUTUBE

SAW AN AD FOR THIS IN A DC *Knight Terror* comic, never thought I'd see a paper ad that linked a YouTube video but I absolutely love all things horror so guess it paid off.

@JUANROJAS6063, VIA YOUTUBE

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CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE #
215

The 1923 death of George Herbert, financier of the search for King Tut's tomb, was widely attributed to the "curse of the pharaohs." In fact, he perished due to an infected mosquito bite.

The original title for 1988's *Child's Play* was *Batteries Not Included*.

Christougenniatikophobia is described as the fear of Christmas and is often rooted in early childhood experiences.

The full version of John W. Campbell's 1938 novella *Who Goes There?*, the inspiration for John Carpenter's *The Thing*, was not published in its entirety until 2019 under the title *Frozen Hell*.

Toward the end of his life, artist Salvador Dalí's constant use of his nurse's call button once caused a short-circuit that set his bed on fire, burning his leg.

One of the two remaining Plymouth Furys from 1983's *Christine* sold in 2004 for \$167,000.

Smartphone cameras have become useful tools for schizophrenics to distinguish between visual hallucinations and reality.

The narration at the opening of *Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood* was spoken by Walt Gorney, who also played the iconic Crazy Ralph in the first two films.

Joe Son, best known for playing Random Task in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, was found guilty of one felony count of torture and given an additional 27 years for killing his cellmate while incarcerated.

"Stoneman Willie," a 128-year-old mummified corpse displayed at a Pennsylvania funeral home, is set to be interred by the end of this year.

A 2022 study found that the adorable meercat is the world's most murderous mammal, with one in five being killed by their kin.

In the 2008 Swedish film *Let the Right One In*, the word "vampire" is only uttered once.



Actress Dakota Johnson underwent two years of ballet training in preparation for her role as Suzy Bannion in 2018's *Suspiria*.

COMPILED BY JAY CLARKE
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SEND IT TO: INFO@RUE-MORGUE.COM

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HOMICIDE ☐

EXPIRING MINDS

ON RUE MORGUE'S
SOCIAL MEDIA

It's a Christmas miracle and you get to name the next Hammer horror movie. What is it?

Hammered

ANDRÉ CORRIVEAU, VIA FACEBOOK

Dracula's Electrifying Affair With the Bride of Frankenstein. She doesn't bat an eyelash as Dracula is shocked to his core.

SCOTT CAMERON PEDIGO, VIA FACEBOOK

The Count Rides His Brides

FLORIAN GRASSL, VIA FACEBOOK

Quatermass 4: Assignment Miami Beach

CRAIG MERCER, VIA FACEBOOK

Dracula 2023 AD and use AI to bring everyone back.

COFFIN JOE, VIA FACEBOOK

The Horror of Dracula's Great Great Great Granddaughter's Tomb That was Dug Up To Make Room For A Housing Development

CHRISSY GILBERT, VIA FACEBOOK

FINAL WORDS

AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA



"THE TIME WINTER DIDN'T BLOW."

THIS MONTH'S CAPTION CONTEST WINNER IS
GABRIELLABOMBSHELL25, VIA INSTAGRAM

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THE 37TH PARALLEL: EXTRATERRESTRIAL PIT STOP?

Jonathan Glazer's 2013 horror sci-fi flick *Under the Skin* offers a grim premise, featuring Scarlett Johansson as a visiting alien being who lures men into a black void where their bodies are broken down in some sort of harvesting process. It's a jarring revelation – not just for the horrifying visuals where flesh and bone are sucked out of drifting skin suits via mysterious technology, but because there's something deeply disturbing in the thought that aliens might see our planet as little more than a fast-food drive-thru. We'd like to think that's not the case in real life, but there's "evidence" that indicates extraterrestrials have found a regular spot in the United States to pick up a quick meal, even if it's not of the human variety.

For over a century, investigators have been baffled by cases of cow mutilation taking place all over America. Incidents frequently involve the precise removal of the animal's bowels, eyes, ears, and genitals, yet not a single speck of blood can be found on or around the carcass. The first recorded incident of this kind dates back to 1894, but the phenomena really caught the public's attention during the 1970s when thousands

of cases were reported in Minnesota, Colorado, Nebraska, and other states. At that time, ranchers suspected the mutilations were performed by cults or even the U.S. government. Claims of black helicopter sightings sparked paranoia among farmers who banded together in vigilante groups, resulting in an incident where a farmer shot at a utility company helicopter used to survey power lines.

Predictably, there are those who believe that the perpetrators may be flying in from much farther away than Washington – among them, paranormal investigator/TV personality Chuck Zukowski. This UFOlogist speculates that the cow mutilations align with his research on a trend of such strange anomalies in an area of the country known as the 37th parallel, the latitude line that stretches through the U.S. from south of San Jose all the way to the Virginia/North Carolina border. Residents of Burnt College, Tennessee, for example, reported seeing inexplicable lights that expanded and contracted in the sky, and Wilmington, Delaware, has recorded phenomena where three red orbs floated in the sky. Occurrences have become so commonplace in the area that author Ben Mezrich, in his book following Zukowski's exploits, has referred to the 37th parallel as "America's



UFO Highway."

There are those who say these sightings are connected to the cow mutilations. Maybe those mysterious lights people see in the sky are aliens on their way to visit the 37th parallel like some kind of intergalactic 7-Eleven. If so, who's to say they won't get tired of cow testicles and want to sample the human variety? Just be wary the next time ScarJo tries to pick you up at a bar.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

Doug McGrath, Sergeant Nash from *Black Christmas* (1974)

Born in Sydney, Nova Scotia, in 1935, Doug McGrath burst onto the Canadian film scene with his portrayal of Pete McGraw in 1970's *Goin' Down the Road*, which would lead him to notable parts in other Canuck cult films such as 1972's *Wedding in White* and a pair of Bob Clark classics: *Black Christmas* (where he learned to spell "fellation") and the granddaddy of all sex comedies, 1981's *Porky's*. McGrath would go on to have a storied career in film and television, working

with the likes of Clint Eastwood (*Pale Rider*), Steven Spielberg (*Twilight Zone: The Movie*), and John Carpenter (*Ghosts of Mars*). Some 40 years after his film debut, he reprised the role of Pete in *Down the Road Again*. McGrath continues to work into his 80s and currently resides in Toronto, Ontario.

JAY CLARKE



NEEDFUL THINGS



1 COSMIC HORROR CRITTERS WRAPPING PAPER

\$25 USD

Do you dare unwrap a gift bound in such unknowable, incomprehensible cosmic horror? Designed by dark cabaret icon Aurelio Voltaire and sold in packs of five 20 X 29 inch smooth matte sheets, this is wrapping paper fit for an Eldritch god.

Society6.com

1



2 YOUR YOUTH MOULDED CANDLE

\$14.99 USD

Why celebrate another year of aging when you can mourn your youth instead? Make your next birthday wish count with this 3.5-inch tombstone-shaped moulded candle – a perfect substitute for when your age makes the whole blowing-out-the-candles tradition a legit fire hazard. Safety first, you old coot!

Killstar.com

2



3 KRAMPUS SWEATER

\$89 USD

Ugly Christmas sweaters are so last year – there's new obnoxiously colourful knitwear in town, ready to dig its krampen into your winter wardrobe! Santa's nasty wingman adorns the front and back of this acrylic (read: wash friendly) sweater, available in sizes small to XXL. Gruß vom Krampus! Birch rods for whipping children not included.

Store.oscilloscope.net

3



4 SCREAM QUEEN PUFFER JACKET

\$98 USD

Even the most stylish scream queen needs to bundle up when the temperatures drop, and that's no reason to sacrifice your sick sense of style. This blood-spattered puffer jacket by Trickz N' Treatz features pockets, a faux fur trim, and is reversible to plain white for when you're fleeing a (fashion) crime scene!

Dollskill.com

4



5 TALKY TINA PROP REPLICA DOLL

\$189.99 USD

"My name is Talky Tina, and I'm going to kill you." Never has a death threat conjured such warm and fuzzy nostalgia as when it's uttered by an 18-inch replica prop doll from *The Twilight Zone*. Tina's lexicon includes five phrases sampled straight from the original audio of the episode and her eyelids open and close for maximum creep factor.

Entertainmentearth.com

5





HANDMADE HORRORS

SILVER WULF DESIGNS

There's no disputing that Halloween reigns supreme as far as our favourite holiday goes, but there's ample fun to be had adding a sense of spookiness to conventional winter festivities. Don't believe us? Just ask Scotty and Raelene of [Silver Wulf Designs](#), who have been selling their handmade horror-themed nutcrackers to customers looking to mix terror with tradition.

"I remember thinking of nutcrackers as a generic Christmas decoration, one of the cookie cutters in a holiday pack," says Scotty, who does the painting. "Since [Silver Wulf Designs] began, we've gotten to talk to passionate collectors of nutcrackers or horror and have learned so much. They've showed us photos of their collection with hundreds of nutcrackers and one of our pieces shoulder to shoulder with [high-end brands like] Steinbach and Ulbricht, or a wall dedicated to the Creature from the Black Lagoon with our work displayed alongside iconic movie memorabilia."

Certainly, the simple shape and style of traditional toy

soldier nutcrackers, with their blank gazes and strong jaws, make them easy candidates for custom paint jobs à la Candyman, Herbert West, or Freddy Krueger. But there's also the nutcracker's superstitious history that adds some edge to their appeal. According to German folklore, nutcrackers given as gifts were known to protect the home of the recipient.

"After learning the origins of [nutcrackers] being good luck charms and the lore of warding off evil spirits, I see them as almost anything but cookie-cutter shapes now," says Scotty. "I think horror characters should be painted on absolutely everything but nutcrackers possess the ability to walk the line of being creepy even without a horror theme, it just makes sense to lean into that."

So, if you've got a pecan fan or cashew craver on your holiday gift list, why not consider a custom one-of-a-kind nutcracker? Some of Silver Wulf Designs' happy customers have sent Scotty and Raelene videos of their wares being received as gifts to share in the surprise and delight,

and the pair has also gifted custom nutcrackers to the celebrities who portrayed those characters.

"Cinematographer Dean Cundey's wife reached out to us to get him one of our Michael Myers. They put it in their Christmas card photo and Dean Cundey sent us some amazing autographed posters," Scotty recalls. "We also donated a Joe Bob and Darcy set to the Ghoultime Get-Together charity auction. We got to see a *Godzilla*-style commercial for our nutcrackers on *The Last Drive-In* and they brought in far more for the charities than we were expecting."

Find Silver Wulf Designs on Etsy: [Etsy.com/shop/SilverWulfDesigns](#).

ANDREA SUBISSATI



CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES

LUMINOUS MONSTER THREE DIMENSIONAL STICKERS

(L.I.L., 1979)

While puffy stickers are most closely identified with the 1980s, the padded (usually with a thin sheet of foam) vinyl-covered decals emerged in the 1970s and were often called "Three Dimensional Stickers." Along with stickers of Casper the Friendly Ghost and Wendy, kids in the late '70s could also collect brightly coloured monster-themed puffy stickers of characters like Dracula, King Kong, the Mummy, Frankenstein's Monster, and more from a company with the rather underwhelming name of L.I.L.

Very popular at the time, these glow-in-the-dark (touted on packaging as "luminous") stick-

ers were sold in multipacks at convenience stores and were also available individually in gumball dispensing machines. They were reissued several times over the years, including as Halloween-themed party favours by party supply manufacturer Unique in the late '80s. Prices vary widely, with loose stickers selling online for a few dollars apiece and new, unopened sheets of stickers offered for \$100 and up on eBay.

JAMES BURRELL

MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT [RUE-MORGUE.COM](#)



QUEBEC FILMMAKER **PASCAL PLANTE** HAS MADE A BLOODLESS
HORROR FILM THAT WILL MAKE YOU SQUIRM IN YOUR SEAT.
THIS IS THE STORY OF **LES CHAMBRES ROUGES**

DEEP
SEEING
RED

BY **ANDREA SUBISSATI**



Blood Sisters: In *Red Rooms*, Clementine (Laurie Babin) and Kelly-Anne (Juliette Gariépy) share a fascination with the Chevalier trial, but with vastly different emotional responses to the hideous video evidence.

If horror fiction and true crime share one thing, it's the sense of experiencing danger from a safe distance. But Pascal Plante's Quebecois crime thriller *Red Rooms* (*Les chambres rouges*) questions the very existence of that safe distance by toying with the negative space between spectacle and reality. It's the sort of enigmatic horror movie where the horror doesn't quite happen onscreen: what we see is a story of a woman coming undone by a morbid fascination, but what we *feel* is a self-aware sense of ick that comes from the recognition that we're sharing in similar dark dealings simply by watching the film. The cardinal rule of filmmaking might be "show, don't tell," but Plante employs a deft hand at ensuring the most grotesque images of *Red Rooms* come from our own sordid imaginations, as we're subject to audio evidence of crimes too hideous to ever be depicted on film, described in the sort of detached, hyperbolic detail you only find in the most charged courtroom. There's no solace to be found in the POV of the film's fellow voyeurs — compelled, as we are, to experience the forbidden depravity of actual snuff footage with real victims and possibly harrowing consequences. In other words, *Red Rooms* is terrifying because we see ourselves in it a little too easily.

The film concerns the enigmatic Kelly-Anne (Juliette Gariépy), an emotionally distant young woman with few specific interests: namely, racquetball, online gambling, and the high-profile murder case of Ludovic Chevalier (Maxwell McCabe-Lokos). She's not alone in that last one — the Chevalier trial is a media sensation and all of Montreal is swept up in the frenzy. Chevalier stands accused of the kidnapping, torture, and

murder of three preteen girls, whose nightmarish ordeals were filmed and broadcasted live on the dark web (via the titular "red rooms"). The prosecution only has footage of two of the murders, but they're confident it's all they need to convince the jury that Chevalier's their man.

Camping out in front of the courthouse, Kelly-Anne makes a friend in fellow spectator Clementine (Laurie Babin) and the pair bond through their shared fascination with the trial, even as they're affected by it quite differently: Clementine is prone to passionate pleas for Chevalier's innocence, to the delight of the news cameras and talk shows eager to squeeze every drop out of the spectacle. Soon, Kelly-Anne's meticulously controlled world starts to crumble as she takes to the dark web herself, testing the boundaries between spectator and participant, and blurring the line between actor and observer.

"I WANTED IT TO FUNCTION AS ONE OF THOSE HORROR STORIES WE WOULD TELL EACH OTHER AROUND THE CAMPFIRE."

— FILMMAKER
PASCAL PLANTE

It's an unconventional horror film from an unconventional filmmaker; the third feature film but the first genre offering from Plante who is also, interestingly, an Olympic-level competitive swimmer. The 35-year-old Montreal native cred-

its the Fantasia Film Festival as a particular site of encouragement for his career, citing the inventive programming and legendary enthusiasm of the audience as part of what makes genre filmmaking in Quebec so vibrant. Having swept Fantasia's Cheval Noir award in four categories this year (Best Feature and Best Screenplay for Plante, Best Performance for star Gariépy, and best score for Pascal's brother, Dominique Plante), *Red Rooms* is poised to remind horror fans of another French extremity happening much closer to home.

Rue Morgue spoke to Plante about true crime, restrained filmmaking, and what makes his film run red with blood without so much as a single drop spilled.

Was there a particular case that inspired the story for *Red Rooms*?

If you think about [a case with] a video from an infamous killer with a trial set in Montreal, there might be one from ten years ago that comes to mind. But actually, we made sure that it was different enough from the [Luka Rocco] Magnotta case. In our case, we wanted the evil to be very banal; to be like almost a business model for someone who's not even a psychopath. In the '70s, the other serial killers that, you know, Netflix is doing show after show about, they usually have that kind of killer instinct — those impulses — and it's very linked to their fantasies, whereas I really wanted the killer in our film to look nothing like that, to do it in such a way that it's almost like business as usual. In a weird way, I almost think that it's even scarier this way; the banality of evil [means it's] possibly lurking everywhere really, and we don't notice it. It's not



**"A SERIAL KILLER IS THE
ULTIMATE BAD BOY."**

— FILMMAKER
PASCAL PLANTE

like people walk around with a sticker on their forehead saying that they're psychopaths. So long story [short], we made sure that it was very fictitious. And [also] I guess, pandemic-fuelled me, digging deeper and deeper and deeper... just being overly online, maybe, led me to the folklore of the dark web, the red rooms.

I'd like to hear more about making the story different enough from real life; where do you draw that line?

It might sound weird, but I love it when a fiction film reminds us, once in a while, that they're fiction films. I like all the seasoning you can put on top of your film — of a narrative film — to make it almost artificial at times, just to remind the audience [they're watching a movie]. I actually like that a lot. But that being said, I made sure that the core of *Red Rooms*, like the foundation of it, was extremely well-documented. I had consultants on the legal side of the spectrum, but also on the geeky, technological side of the spectrum. We actually had one of our consultants doing tests of live streams on the Tor network to be extremely sure that it was doable in 2022 — because it wasn't, let's say, in 2019, for instance, hence all the debate around the [question if red rooms] even exist. But now they can exist, technologically speaking. That's all kind of geek talk but my point is that we actually made sure that the foundation was extremely well documented. That said, I'm a narrative filmmaker and a fiction filmmaker, so since we are following the psychology of the main character, who becomes more and more unreliable as the film progresses and indulges more and more into fantasies, that allowed me to be extremely expressionistic and to go sideways from reality. And this is fun, making kind of a disguised ghost story in a way like she's almost like this ghost — this spectral avenger, lurking, floating. So, this is very fun for an artist/filmmaker, to be able to transcend that documentary-like foundation and just go expressionistic; use sound, music, images, go crazy. This is the fun of me doing it and also, I hope, the fun of the audience perceiving it.

What's your take on the massive appeal of true crime right now? Is there something different now or is it the same as when we used to watch the gladiators fight back in the day?

Well, there's definitely two things at play here. There's something definitely innate in it, in the sense that, let's say, you walk down the street and you see two people fighting — there's almost no way you will not look at them. I think it has to do with danger, the way we, as a species, on an evolutionary level, perceive danger. We actually *need* to recognize it — like, look at it and recognize it in order to be able to step away from it and escape it. So, there's something very innate about it. That is one [reason], but it's

exacerbated in the world we're living in, being overly online. A lot of people's lives are very boring and banal, so in a weird way, it's almost like we flirt with danger, while remaining very safe at home. When I was writing the film in 2021, we were very much [being] drowned in Dahmer shows and Bundy shows and whatnot. And also, it was super weird because by researching for the film, I got to watch more [true crime] than I would normally. They can be very run-of-the-mill, meat-and-potatoes, talking heads [in format]; those documentary true-crime [shows] can be very cinematically non-stimulating for a cinephile, but we always get sucked in. And at the end of watching a six-hour show on the most evil person you can think of, I always felt drained, like I'd been had, you know? They're usually narcissistic people so it's like we are complicit in their needs – like their god complex is nourished by all this in a weird way. So I would go into it and get hypnotized by it and afterward, you have a hangover, a cultural hangover. You're like, "Aw man, I just spent six hours watching *nothing*."

Just feeding this nutcase's ego, giving him what he wants.

Yeah, that whole thing. It got me really thinking about it, like, if we see ourselves as consumers and the content as a product, [then] when you consume, you vote for something in a way, and we are massively voting for something that is almost dangerous and weird. So that whole thought process led me to reflect on it, while also indulging it in a genre film that can be pleasing for the audience. It's a tightrope to walk on, but this was the aim.

Do you have any theories as to why women in particular tend to respond to true crime?

This is a very good question. Kelly-Anne is obviously very non-definable by one thing; I purposely didn't want her to have one psychiatric label and, oh, all your questions are answered. That being said, there might be two things that actually helped me when I talked to the actress and in understanding Kelly-Anne. The first thing is not that important: she's just adrenaline-seeking. Somebody a bit dead inside and whether it's gambling or anything she does, it's exciting [for her] to feel alive. That's one thing. But there is another thing which has a label, called hybristophilia, when you're kind of turned on by horrible crimes or murder or acts of violence.

It's a paraphilia, basically, and I've read somewhere, I don't know if that's super scientifically bulletproof, but that 90% of hybristophiliacs are women, and that's very intriguing to me. I have no answer as to why, but something I would want to reflect on is another thing at play, which is



State Of Shock: Although little violence is shown in *Red Rooms*, the courtroom scenes of the prosecution and defence reach moments of unbearable dread.

the way we bring up women. Because a lot of the "groupies" have that *salvatrice* [savior complex]. They want to save them, like, "Oh, with my love and understanding, he can change." And that's also tied to the cliché of why women are attracted to bad boys; a serial killer is the ultimate bad boy at the end of the day, right? And so, I think it has to do with the Christian, traditional upbringing of a lot of people, maybe.

Tell me about the decision to omit graphic violence when that's what *Red Rooms* is all about.

For the record, I'm not puritanical. I could watch gory horror films all day. It's not about me being against the graphic depiction of violence in films; I think it can be very fun and handled very well. That's one thing. But in this particular film, it's very much tied to the ethics that I was talking about earlier, but I also wanted it to function as one of those horror stories we would tell each other around the campfire. I wanted the film to be very much about the mood. During the pandemic

I discovered (very late in the game) the world of creepypasta: the podcasts where they basically just tell you horror stories. And sometimes the good ones, the good creepypastas, play with your head in such a strong way, they're much more efficient than 95% of horror films. It's like how when you're deprived of one of your senses, the other senses become hyperactive, but within the context of sheer, lurking horror, what's hidden in the lower depths of society and human depravity. I felt that when one of the senses was removed, [the horror] just became stronger, if that makes sense.

Completely. Is there a particular cinematic example that inspired you?

One of the filmmakers that inspired me maybe the most for this particular film was Michael Haneke. *Funny Games* is very hard to watch but there's very little graphic violence – actually, the only time there's graphic violence, we, as an audience, root for it, and then they're like, "No, no, no, let's go back," and he rewinds and he toys

TWO NEW MONTREAL-SHOT HORROR COMEDIES DIG UP CINEMATIC IDEAS ABOUT VAMPIRES, ZOMBIES, AND WHAT MAKES A FILM FRENCH-CANADIAN

LE HORREUR

HUMANIST

BY SEAN PLUMMER

If a movie is shot in Montreal but doesn't acknowledge that fact, is it still a French Canadian film? And what if its characters — *sacre bleu!* — speak English instead of French?

These are the sort of very Canadian questions that come up when discussing two new horror comedies filmed in and around Quebec's largest city. Opening in theatres on October 13, *Humanist Vampire Seeking Consenting Suicidal Person* (original title: *Vampire humaniste cherche suicidaire consentant*) is a coming-of-age film about Sasha (Sara Montpetit), a young vampire (she's only 68) whose empathy for humans prevents her from making her own kills. This debut feature from writer/director Ariane Louis-Seize had its world premiere this past September at the Toronto International Film Festival.

The other, *We Are Zombies*, is the latest from RKSS (a.k.a. François Simard, Anouk Whissell, and Yoann-Karl Whissell), the much-loved Quebec filmmaking trio behind the 2015 action-comedy *Turbo Kid* and the 2018 retro horror film *Summer of 84*. This near-future zom-com is an adaptation of a French comic book and posits the "living impaired" not as aggressive cannibals but as annoyances taking up space and jobs from the living. It is set for release in 2024.

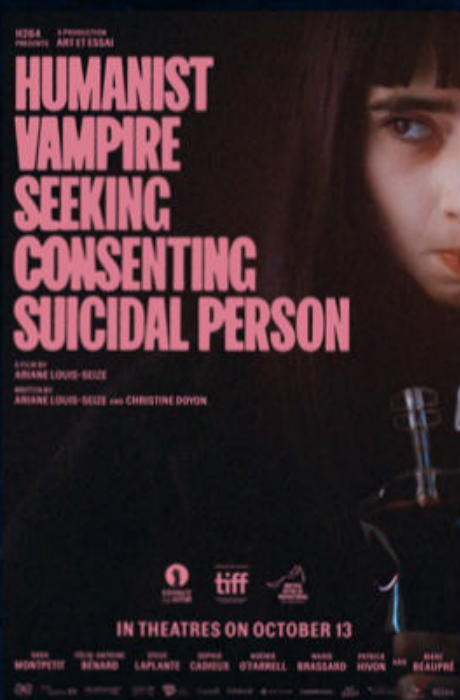
We Are Zombies had its world premiere this past summer at Montreal's Fantasia Film Festival, scooping the Gold Audience Award for Best Quebec Feature. Most importantly to RKSS, though, it was met enthusiastically by an audience at a festival they have been attending since its founding in 1996, when they were still teenagers.

"Fantasia was our film school," says Anouk, "and to move from being in the audience to present a movie in front of people, this audience, I mean, it's incredible. And the love we receive every time we screen something at Fantasia is overwhelming. It's really important. It gives you energy to keep on doing it, to keep on working through the [industry] bullshit and want to still tell stories. And it's that love that makes you want to do it."

We Are Zombies is based on the comic book series *The Zombies That Ate the World*, which first ran in legendary French magazine *Métal Hurlant* in 2003. The members of RKSS were approached by French producers about making it into a film back in 2014 while they were in post-production on *Turbo Kid* in New Zealand. The project went through a number of iterations — from movie to TV show and back — and was about to get financing when *Summer of 84* was greenlit in 2017. There was also discussion about whether it would be in French or English, but the latter language prevailed.

"In a genre film, to do it in English gives you a bigger audience," admits Yoann. "Your movie will be able to be seen everywhere in the world, so it's logical to go that way."

While *We Are Zombies* was shot in Montreal, it is set in an unnamed metropolis, although many of the city's landmarks are visible and the filmmakers didn't go out of their way to hide their hometown. That said, Yoann notes that most of the actors and crew are locals, and they hope their film is enjoyed by horror fans everywhere. "Shooting it at home, it is a French-Canadian movie," he says, "but it's



also a Canadian movie, and it's also a worldwide movie. I think right now, as a population, times are tough and I think we're talking to everyone in the world with this movie."

Filmmaker Louis-Seize had a similar agenda in terms of making a film with broad audience appeal, although her actors speak French. Co-written with Christine Doyon, *Humanist Vampire* has some Quebecois-specific imagery – such as Sasha playing her electric piano for change in front of her local *depanneur* (convenience store) and buying poutine (a popular Canadian meal consisting of fries, gravy, and cheese curds) even though she knows she can only ingest blood – but Montreal is never identified and the film takes place in an unnamed suburb.

Indeed, when asked if she thinks her film has a particularly Quebecois sense of humour – whatever that may mean – Louis-Seize has difficulty answering the question.

"I'm not sure," she says. "I worked with [editor] Stéphane Lafleur. He's a filmmaker as well and he has that sense of humour as well. There's a lot of drama and [feelings of] emptiness in the characters but also a deadpan comedy situation. I like that kind of combination, but I don't think anyone does that sort of humour except him, and I think I have similar interests. I think it's more universal, really, than Quebec."

Both films also upend the conventions of their respective "monsters." In the case of *We Are Zombies*, the "living impaired" have no taste (at least initially) for human flesh. Instead, they merely want to find their place in society by continuing to work, although this has resulted in the firing of living people from their jobs, as zombies don't need to sleep. The resulting societal resentment motivates families to hire the Amazon-sized Coleman Corporation to get rid of their undead relatives via their Retirement Services for the Living Impaired. Rethinking this popular movie monster was "very fun," Yoann says.

"That's the reason we wanted to do it, because it felt less formulaic and it felt less like what we've seen before in terms of zombies. It was fun to explore something that's different and to use something that's been told a lot but tell it in another way. That's what interested us in the comic book and turning it into a feature as well."

Louis-Seize similarly enjoyed not only rethinking the vampire as hero but combining comedy and horror through the lens of a feel-good film.

"The fact that we mixed a coming-of-age story with a vampire story – mixed the code – it was fun. Because in one situation and one scene



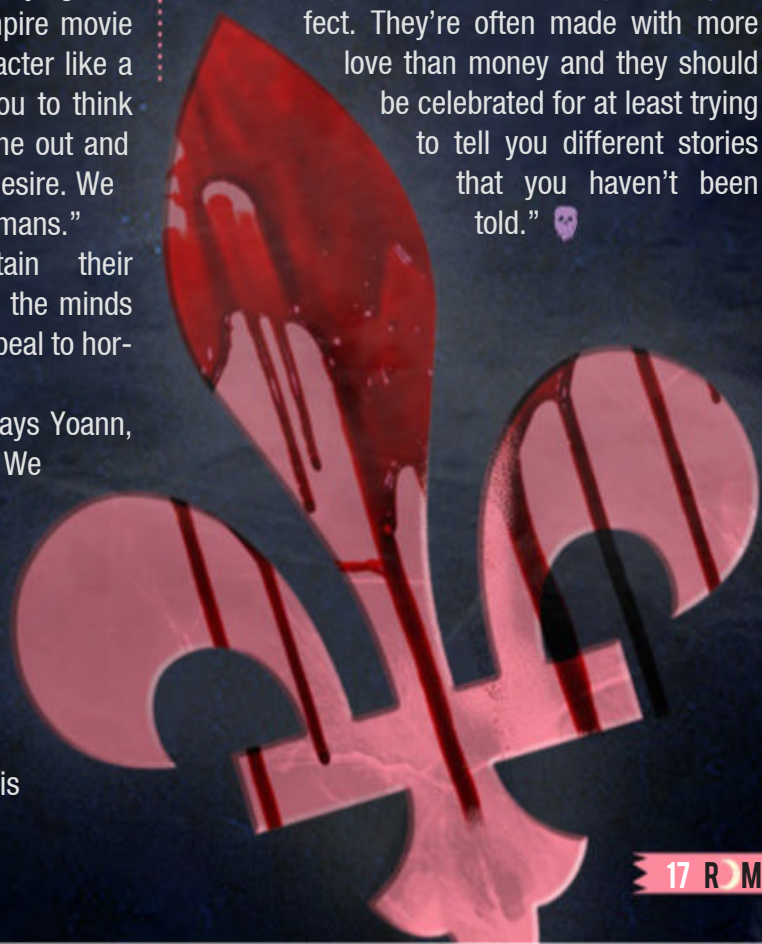
The Other French Extremity: Two new horror-comedies from Quebec offer unique takes on classic monsters: *We Are Zombies* (top) and *Humanist Vampire Seeks Consenting Suicidal Person*.

you can play with all those codes, and people now think it's going to go in some direction and it goes somewhere else by switching the code with comedy. So we have lots of fun playing with that. Actually, I wanted to do a vampire movie but I wanted to treat my main character like a regular teenager. Because I want you to think about it; the first time her teeth come out and she has to bite or kill is like sexual desire. We like to play with those parallels to humans."

Ultimately, both films maintain their French-Canadian identity, at least in the minds of their makers, and are meant to appeal to horror fans worldwide.

"Horror fans are the best fans," says Yoann, "and we are horror fans ourselves. We buy everything, we go see everything. We are passionate about horror movies or sci-fi movies or action movies because... I don't know, there's something about it. There's a community linked to it. And we get hardcore about our love of genre film, and that community is

absolutely beautiful. And I think that community made it easier now to get financing. But easier doesn't mean easy. So celebrate every indie film that gets made, even if they're not perfect. They're often made with more love than money and they should be celebrated for at least trying to tell you different stories that you haven't been told." 🧛





"A LOT OF MY ARTISTIC DECISIONS WERE MEANT FOR THE FILM TO BE HAUNTING, TO LEAVE YOU WITH SOMETHING."

– FILMMAKER
PASCAL PLANTE

with you. I like films that are extremely aware of how audiences react, and you can comfort them but usually you don't. You try to be like a good chess player and be one move ahead and reroute your audience's brain. I guess me discovering the creepypastas and the way they made me feel, I [wanted] to get that working, even though we have all the senses when we watch a film; our senses are at play, but it's me as a filmmaker who has to make those decisions. A lot of my artistic decisions were meant for the film to be haunting, to leave you with something. A film that maybe you won't forget right away. And philosophically speaking, one of the ways that I used was to have you generate horrific images in your brain, and then you deal with it. You're the one to react and interact with that crazy depravity.

Did you intend to unsettle your audience with the implication that they too are engaging in a spectacle of violence by watching a horror film?

In a way, yes, [but] the film was not, by design, meant to work purely on shock value. My aim was not to shock you. I think maybe there's a hint of where I'm coming from, ethically or philosophically speaking in the final words of the film. After all is said and done, it's kind of a sad story, and we should always think about the victims. Again, those Netflix shows where you have six hours just going super deep into the portrait of a narcissistic, barbaric, garbage

human being, and then sometimes you would have a little text at the end: "Our thoughts go to the victims." And you're like, "Yeah well, it's too little too late!" Whereas I know, in our film, we kind of forget about all the victims and have to in order to finish on the thoughts of them. But I hope *Red Rooms* is perceived as something more genuine and authentic than the little text at the end of a six-hour true-crime Netflix show.

Quebec is known for having a very vibrant art scene, and also for libertarian attitudes towards sex and stuff like that. Does that translate into depictions of violence in genre films?

Probably. Let me put it this way: yes, [Quebec] is open-minded and when you have a good percentage of the inhabitants of a city that are open-minded, you can easily find your niche audience or your core audience. [*Red Rooms*] is not by design a mainstream film, really it appeals more to a niche. But what ended up happening – because we do have a good box office for our theatrical run – sometimes [a film] translates from a niche core audience to a more main-

stream one because of word of mouth and online buzz and whatnot. And I think Montreal is fun because sometimes you start off with your core audience, and yet it's small enough and word of mouth gets around enough that you can go outside of that box a little bit and reach a wider audience. Whereas I think maybe elsewhere, it would just be confined within the main audience you've targeted and just stay there. Sometimes it doesn't translate to a wider audience but it did in our case, so we're extremely pleased about that.

That's interesting, because it kind of challenges my general notion about Quebec being this very unique part of Canada, with a population that really fights to hang on to its uniqueness and its authenticity and its values. Does that play into filmmaking in Quebec?

For me, I very much think that the film is very Quebecois. But that said, a lot of my inspiration (or European inspiration) comes from films from anywhere, really. I keep coming back to the way I watch movies as a cinephile. Even though the film is Quebecois – I am Quebecois – there are many facets to why it does have an international appeal; of course, there's going to be English language [in the film], because English is the language of the internet. I'm proud to be Quebecois. I understand how Quebecois cultural identity is very distinct, and I'm going to leave it at that and create art that appeals to me as a cinephile and, hence, it can appeal to somebody in Germany, somebody in English Canada, somebody in Asia or whatever. 🍷



THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF ASHER

An Edgar Allan Poe-Inspired
Murder Mystery

RUE MORGUE SPEAKS WITH THE MAKEUP MAVENS BEHIND CREATURE COSMETICS,
NOTORIOUSLY MORBID, AND LUNATICK COSMETIC LABS TO DISCUSS THE BUDDING
INDEPENDENT INDUSTRY THAT DARES TO MIX BEAUTY AND HORROR

LOOKS THAT KILL

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI



There was once a time, not so very long ago, where the beauty-conscious horror fan was largely limited to the spooky seasonal cosmetics products that appeared on drugstore shelves every October. Cheap and gimmicky (in price, presentation, and quality), these press-on nails cracked and the black lipsticks bled, so those of us attempting to achieve the posthumous prettiness of the recently deceased were relegated to using products intended for other purposes – red lipstick as eyeshadow, since red eye makeup was then unheard of, or using Sharpies to paint one’s fingernails black. But from the ashes of these frustrations, a generation of entrepreneurs was inspired to fill that gaping maw in the beauty industry, so ghouls of today need never know what it was like before indie horror cosmetics were a thing.

“I would absolutely use black eyeliner for lipstick; I did that constantly,” recalls Carrie Marcum, who launched her indie horror makeup brand *Notoriously Morbid* in 2013. “Then there was Halloween, of course, you’d have costume makeup come out and you’d hoard it just to have it year-long.”

“Back in 2012, everything was pretty and infused in pink,” agrees cosmetologist Cat Erwin, who launched *LunatiCK Cosmetic Labs* out of her basement around the same time. “You really couldn’t even go into Hot Topic and find makeup back then. You had to go to the Halloween stores to get it.”

For Joey Von Frankenstein, founder and headmistress of *Creature Cosmetics*, alternative makeup was available but not on a teenage horror fiend’s budget. Growing up a veritable monster kid looking up to the likes of Tom Savini, she devoted herself to horror makeup and special effects in the film industry until COVID brought her budding career to a halt. Undeterred, she started her own cosmetics line at the tender age of nineteen.

“I was always alternative, and I never had a brand that was affordable enough to where I could just go to the store and pick it up,” she explains. “When I was in my teens, I was finally able to branch out and afford those alternative brands. And when I did buy those alternative brands, I wasn’t happy with [them], specifically the black lipstick. It was so hard to find a black lipstick or a red lipstick that wasn’t pink or orange. And so, I was like, ‘Screw it, I’ll make it myself.’”

With attitudes as bold as their shades, these entrepreneurs are writing the spooky chapter of a new lookbook in the cosmetics industry, an indie revolution to give the likes of Revlon and Rimmel a run for their money.

“I was looking for red eyeshadow back in 2011-ish, and couldn’t find it,” says Marcum. “I couldn’t find it locally, couldn’t find it in drugstores around my area, so I went online and found an indie cosmetics brand. I ordered it and when I got my order, I recognized all the ingredi-



Cosmetics Fit For Cadavers: *LunatiCK Cosmetic Labs* (top) and *Morbidly Beautiful* offer shades and pigments that are too ghoulish for the mainstream.

ents because I used to be a [soap-maker], and I was like, ‘Oh, I know what this is,’ and I realized that there are a lot of colours that are not very available in mainstream stores.”

“THE MACABRE CAN SPEAK TO A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO SEE THE BEAUTY OF THE DARKNESS.”

– CARRIE MARCUM, NOTORIOUSLY MORBID

You might be wondering, what specifically constitutes “horror cosmetics”? It’s a genre, yes, and an art form, but horror doesn’t fit neatly into an established beauty aesthetic – not like its kissing cousin goth, easily spotted at Hot Topics, Twin Temple concerts, and that one day a year when they release bats into Disneyland. Striking and bold in an extra morbid kind of way, horror

beauty runs the spectrum from gothic glamour to cosplay-level ghoulishness. It’s as vast and varied as our beloved cinematic genre itself, and that’s where these indie brands have risen to the occasion.

“You have your subtle gothic makeup, and then you have your [special] effects and dramatic [makeup],” says Marcum of the intersection between horror and goth beauty. “As far as *horror* makeup is concerned, that’s where it starts to bleed into the effects and dramatic makeup. There’s one girl who did a complete Nosferatu look and you could not tell that it was her. And she used all *Notoriously Morbid* makeup to do it.”

Von Frankenstein sees her own personal aesthetic as a 50/50 split between goth glam and ’80s horror love; the former from her mom’s vampiric looks, the latter from her dad’s cinematic tastes, which he shared with his daughter



from an early age. Creature Cosmetics is the result of watching horror films very closely.

"I see every little colour when I'm watching a movie," she explains. "We actually dissect them, scene by scene, for our eyeshadow palettes. Like specifically the Necronomicon one: there's one [shade] called Deer Dance, and it's based on the scene [in *Evil Dead 2*] where the deer is laughing at Ash. That colour is pulled directly from that scene. My favourite part about building an eyeshadow palette specifically is the dissection of the colour of the movie."

In addition to the rare offering of unconventional hues that are equally appealing to goths, punks, drag queens, and just about anyone looking to get away from mainstream beauty, the horror love seeps through these brands from their innovative packaging to the glut of licensing opportunities that have opened up over the years.

"WE DID COOL CONTOURS, WHERE YOU CAN ACTUALLY CAST AN AUTHENTIC SHADOW. IT'S NOT THAT ABNORMAL; IT'S REALLY JUST BASIC COLOUR THEORY THAT WE HAVEN'T DONE IN THE COSMETIC INDUSTRY [BEFORE] AND I'M NOT SURE WHY."

**— CAT ERWIN,
LUNATICK COSMETIC LABS**

"[LunatiCK] was the first one to do the coffin-shaped palette, and we trademarked that," says Erwin. "Now we license it out — we've done deals with Elvira, Vampira... we've been able to have more brand recognition that way, and we love to see it."

For Von Frankenstein, the journey toward official licensing began with a slew of bright ideas (including a cotton-candy-scented *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* lip gloss) and inquiries, but just as many rejections. She got her first break from *Re-Animator*, who agreed to license Creature Cosmetics' line of lippies packaged in plastic syringes (in "Re-agent Green," "Meg's Dead Magenta," and "Talking Head Red").

"It's licenses that I never would have even thought of getting," she admits. "I don't want to make makeup that looks like makeup. I want it to look like you have to question if that's makeup, like with the Necronomicon palette bound in faux



Groovy Beauty: *Evil Dead 2* is just one among several official horror movie licenses secured by indie brand Creature Cosmetics.

leather and stuff. You don't think that it's a palette until you open it and realize, 'Oh, that's an eyeshadow palette.' And that was my objective with the syringes too, because it's a syringe."

Since the *Re-Animator* line, Creature Cosmetics has partnered for cosmetic lines around *Return of the Living Dead*, *Trick 'R Treat*, *Evil Dead 2*, and *Sleepaway Camp* to name a few. The boom of horror cosmetics on social media is a strong indication that makeup-wearing horror fans want to wear their love for the genre on their faces as well as their sleeves. Further, savvy consumers know the difference between a costly franchise label slapped on a generic product, and a brand built by fright fans for fellow fans.

"I wanted to be true to myself when I did my brand," says Marcum. "That's the stuff that I'm into; I knew that I could do a good job if I stuck with the subjects that I loved. And I know that there are other people out there like me. So that's why I ended up going in the direction that I did. I didn't want to be fake. I wanted to keep it to something that was very close to my heart."

As further evidence that indie horror brands are more than just ghoulish gimmicks and sinister shelf appeal, LunatiCK Cosmetic Labs was initially intended for on-set makeup professionals (the brand's best-selling HD microfinish powder, packaged in a Ouija planchette, was developed specifically to eliminate shadow on film). Both LunatiCK and Notoriously Morbid offer high-quality contour products in unconventional cool-toned hues that simply

cannot be found at your everyday department store cosmetics counter and if the reviews are any indication, these are must-have products for any makeup maven — not just us spooky ones.

"What really got us going is we were the first one to do an [unconventional] contour kit," says Erwin, referring to LunatiCK's two Pro Contour palettes with interchangeable pressed powder pots ranging from golds to greys and everything in between. "We did cool contours, where you can actually cast an authentic shadow. It's not that abnormal; it's really just basic colour theory that we haven't done in the cosmetic industry [before] and I'm not sure why."

"Necromancy contour is our number one best-seller for years now and I think that's a lot to do with the fact that you can't particularly find that shade of contour anywhere," agrees Marcum, of Notoriously Morbid's loose contour powder, available in two sizes and averaging a perfect 5-star rating. "A lot of our customers are pale girls, they buy a lot of Necromancy."

Indeed, business is good. The world of creepy cosmetics may seem incredibly niche, but the big makeup brands aren't about to ignore the social media posts racking up thousands of likes for coffin-shaped compacts. Not only is the market becoming saturated by big brand copycats getting in on the licensing, the availability of cheap ingredients from overseas means that just about anyone can start up an indie makeup brand — to which Marcum and Erwin warn consumers that "indie" isn't necessarily the same as ethically sourced or locally manufactured.

"When I first started, I feel like indie cosmet-



"I DON'T WANT TO MAKE MAKEUP THAT LOOKS LIKE MAKEUP."

**— JOEY VON FRANKENSTEIN,
CREATURE COSMETICS**



ics companies were making unique things that you really didn't see, and a lot of the big-name brands saw something in that and started to try to reproduce the same things," says Marcum. "And then when the pandemic hit, some of the products from overseas were very easily attainable. It wasn't that they sat at home and created the formulas and the recipes for all the cosmetics, they were able to contact the manufacturer overseas and bought them. So, we saw an influx of indie cosmetics [that were] not necessarily handmade. It's changed the dynamic in our industry, especially because there's so many options now."

"The reason why independent cosmetics are everywhere is because they are [now] able to be made very, very quickly," affirms Erwin. "I source all of my ingredients, suppliers, manufacturers, everything that goes into it; I vet them. I make sure that my makeup doesn't come, like, finished from China. That is where you are able to make and manufacture and pump out products of decent... well, they *look* like decent quality, but it's kind of like 'fast beauty.' A couple of independent manufacturers do stay in the U.S. like me, and that is kind of what sets the standards apart: knowing where it's coming from, what's going into it, who made it, etc."



Of course, anything proudly donning blood-splattered packaging is bound to be met with criticism from the likes of the less morbidly inclined, and indie horror cosmetics are no exception. In fact, Von Frankenstein admits that she receives at least one complaint per collection. Among the highlights from her hate-mail folder include someone who felt that Creature Cosmetics' shark attack palette was insensitive to survivors of shark attacks, and a disgruntled pet lover who took issue

with the *Re-Animator* lip set, which includes Herbert West's infamous Post-it note reading "Cat dead, details later," on the packaging. Most surprising for Von Frankenstein was the time someone on social media interpreted the drip-faced Tarman adorning the *Return of the Living Dead* palette as blackface-adjacent.

"They thought it was in reference to racism. I had to give them an entire synopsis on the character," says Von Frankenstein. "I was

like 'No no no, I promise you, this is a character from a movie where he's in a bucket of tar, literally. A man in tar.' I didn't expect that. I thought everyone knew who Tarman was."

If we stopped celebrating the genre every time non-horror fans went overboard, we'd need a much bigger boat. Overall, indie horror cosmetics have the unifying effect of marrying the twin passions of beauty and the macabre and encouraging fright fans to play with palettes and paints made expressly with their unique sensibilities in mind. Horror is beautiful, after all.

"A lot of people don't see the beauty in it," says Marcum, adding: "I've always been a person who has tried to look at the beauty of everything surrounding me, there's beauty in everything. I think that the macabre can speak to a lot of people who see the beauty of the darkness. There are a lot of us out there like that and it's not necessarily an attitude or personality trait that people are accepting of. And that makes it even more unique, in my view." 🧛



GOT A SPOOKY SIREN ON YOUR HOLIDAY WISHLIST? STUFF THEIR STOCKING WITH ITEMS FROM THESE *RUE MORGUE*-APPROVED INDIE HORROR COSMETIC BRANDS!

GLAMOUR GHOUL GIFT GUIDE

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI

RITUEL DE FILLE

Ritueldefille.com

Something wicked this way comes! Founded by three sisters (one from marriage), L.A.-based company Rituel de Fille first caught our attention with its unconventional products in unusual formats – aubergine contour in a compact (Inner Glow Crème Pigment in “Eclipse”), semi-matte eyeliner in little plastic spheres (The Black Orb Enigmatic Kohl Eyeliner), and the best-selling Ash and Ember Eye Soots, little pots of shimmering, multi-use pigments with a texture somewhere between powder and cream. With its emphasis on all-natural ingredients, Rituel de Fille’s approach to beauty encourages its customer base (dubbed “rituelists”) to experiment with pigments and products the way a witch might toss ingredients into a cauldron. Among its more unique products is the rose-scented Thorn Milk Hydrating Skin Mist, which promises instant moisture and refreshment in its blood red-tinged formula, packaged in a potion bottle fit for Countess Bathory.



BAD & BRUJA

Badandbrujalashes.com

Established in 2017, Bad & Bruja became social media standouts with the launch of its line of false lashes packaged in VHS tape cartridges (including weathered “horror” and “be kind, rewind” stickers, naturally) but quickly expanded to include interesting horror-themed wares inspired by classic cinema and Halloween. Of note are the company’s spooky makeup sponges – adorable little ghosts and pumpkins that look so cute on your vanity, you almost don’t want to dirty them up with use. But my favourite product is the one you keep with you on the run: oil control sheets for a bad bruja in need of a blot on the go, packaged in incredible retro pulp artwork by the notorious Alex Vincent. Choose between the matcha-infused Zombie Pack or the charcoal-infused Wolf Man Pack and save the Tarman look for the movies!

MAKEUP A MURDER

Makeupamurder.com

Hello, beauty police? We’d like to report a hot ghoul homicide! Based out of Lakeland, Florida, Makeup A Murder was established in 2018 by Theresa Spencer, an enterprising woman seeking to combine her love of bold, outrageous colour and... forensic science? Why not! The resulting monster of a brand offers a full line of crime scene-themed beauty products as “evidence” (Sketch Artist brushes and Poison Pigment loose powder vials, to name a few), but I especially love the blisteringly bright Toxic Waste water-activated hydra eyeliners, packaged in tiny, dripping pots festooned with nuclear hazard symbols. Also available are the highly volatile Toxic Waste Crème Eyeliners that glow under UV black light and look like they could just as easily contain zombifying trioxin gas.



BLACK MOON COSMETICS

Blackmooncosmetics.com

One should never judge a book by its cover, but it's hard not to fall for Black Moon Cosmetics' deliciously gothic design. Fortunately for us ghouls, the makeup is every bit as good as its packaging, particularly when it comes to the brand's line of lip products. The Sinister Satins are classic bullet lipsticks, and not only do they come in slick coffin boxes, the shades bear names such as Elm Street (blood red), Misery (taupe nude), Trick 'R Treat (burnt sienna), and Hellraiser (per the website: "a cobalt blue that has such sights to show you"). But the one that put Black Moon on the map and keeps it on rotation in our lipstick drawer is the Liquid to Matte line – long-wearing, lightweight, and scented like vanilla cupcakes with 28 shades to choose from. As a bonus, they're also cruelty-free (unlike those pesky Cenobites).



VAMPYRE COSMETICS

Vampyrecosmetics.com

With a wealth of licensed partnerships including Vincent Price, Winchester Mystery House, and Emily the Strange (not to mention an upcoming Living Dead Dolls collab), Vampyre Cosmetics has shot from indie sweetheart to being sold in Hot Topic stores across the continent. What makes it so popular? In addition to the innovative line ideas and whimsical packaging (eyeshadow palettes housed in *Dracula* hardcover books, Vampire Vineyards lipsticks that come in tiny wine bottles, the Winchester Pen line that bears Sarah Winchester's signature), Vampyre Cosmetics is equally bold in its mission statement: striving to be a "beauty disruptor" by "renouncing social constructs of beauty and replacing them with individual ones." Applying makeup never felt so radical! Of special interest to horror fans are the special collections: this year's *Silent Hill* collab, for example, features a beautifully designed box set with three liquid lipsticks and two special edition palettes of Pyramid Head and the iconic blind nurses. It's the kind of set that'll sell out in minutes, the kind collectors won't even want to open, much less smear across their Pyramid faces. And you know, we're okay with that.



JEFFREE STAR COSMETICS

Jeffreestarcosmetics.com

Controversial social media celebrity-turned-makeup mogul Jeffree Star might not be as famous to horror fans as he is to his millions of social media followers, and his inevitable cosmetics line isn't quite the sort of cottage industry creepery we've been featuring thus far. Still, there's no denying that the gender-bending glamazon likes to flirt with his dark side, particularly with offerings like his Cremated Artistry eyeshadow palette, which boasts 24 grey-scale shades with names including Death Certificate and Pallbearer for achieving the sort of deathly pallor that would look right at home in *Night of the Living Dead*. But the items that had me racing to the checkout page were the Beauty Slayer hand mirrors – available in a number of fun shapes, including... wait for it... a blood-spattered cleaver. Do we use a hand mirror much these days? No. Do we nonetheless need a bloody cleaver mirror to hang from the wall to add some *TCM* butchery to our beauty routine? That's a big yes.



**AMICUS PRODUCTIONS, THE BRITISH FILM COMPANY
BEHIND A SLEW OF CLASSIC PORTMANTEAU FILMS FROM
THE 1970s, IS BACK FROM THE GRAVE**

AMICUS RISING

BY JAMES BURRELL



While the shadow of England's Hammer Film Productions justifiably looms large over the landscape of classic British horror cinema, it was by no means the only game in town. From 1965 to 1977, UK-based Amicus Productions gave Hammer a run for its money by creating a slew of low-budget yet memorable screen shockers and fantasy opuses, with an emphasis on the portmanteau film – often giving audiences four or five compact little chillers for the price of one.

Dr. Terror's House of Horrors (1965), *Torture Garden* (1967), *Asylum* (1972), and *From Beyond the Grave* (1974) were some of the classic anthology titles to come out of Britain's other fright film factory. And while Hammer's gothic horrors tended to be set in the 19th century and featured castles, foreboding forests, and mist-filled graveyards, Amicus nearly always set their horror movies in the present day, often featuring everyday locales like homes, offices, and medical clinics.

“IT’S AS IF THE 1970s AND ’60s NEVER ENDED, OR AT LEAST THAT’S THE ATMOSPHERE WE’RE AIMING FOR.”

**AMICUS PRESIDENT
LAWRIE BREWSTER**

Formed in November 1961 by screenwriter/producer Milton Subotsky and law graduate-turned-producer Max J. Rosenberg, Amicus' first horror movie was a hit upon release. Written by Subotsky and directed by Freddie Francis (*Dracula Has Risen from the Grave*), *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* tells of five passengers aboard a train who are foretold their frightful futures – which involve altercations with a werewolf, murderous vine, a dismembered hand, voodoo god, and vampires – by the mysterious tarot card-reading Dr. Schreck (Peter Cushing). The soon-to-be classic film cemented Amicus' reputation in the horror genre.

At that time, Amicus had also produced the only existing theatrical film adaptations of the science fiction television series *Doctor Who*, with *Dr. Who and the Daleks* (1965) and *Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150 A.D.* (1966), both of which starred Cushing in the titular role. Numerous other projects followed over the next decade, including *The House That Dripped Blood* (1971)



Amicus Family Values: Vincent Price poses with Amicus' founder Milton Subotsky, wife Fiona, and sons Sergei and Dmitri.

and the EC Comics adaptations *Tales from the Crypt* (1972) and *The Vault of Horror* (1973), as well as non-anthologies like *The Skull* (1965) and *Madhouse* (1974), the latter a co-production with American International Pictures, which in addition to Cushing, also starred Vincent Price.

The final films from the company – before a growing rift between Subotsky and Rosenberg led to its demise in the mid-'70s – were a trio of adventure films based on the works of *Tarzan* creator Edgar Rice Burroughs. Though Amicus worked with much lower budgets than Hammer, the company was able to acquire the talents of *Psycho* author Robert Bloch to pen many of its scripts, and secure such name actors as Cushing, Christopher Lee, Charlotte Rampling, Sir Ralph Richardson, and Joan Collins.

Now, after decades of long absence, Amicus Productions is back from the dead with a new film, *In the Grip of Terror*, currently in the development stage. Restarting the company are director/producer and new president Lawrie Brewster, along with writer/producer Sarah Daly – the duo behind award-winning independent Scottish-based production and distribution company Hex Studios. With several horror and fantasy films to their credit, including *Lord of Tears* (2013), *The Unkindness of Ravens* (2016), and *The Devil's Machine*, (2019), Brewster and Daly feel confident they can resurrect the brand.

“Amicus Productions has been reborn with a unique perspective,” Brewster tells *Rue Morgue*. “It’s as if the 1970s and ’60s never ended, or at least that’s the atmosphere we’re aiming for. While our envisioned style for the films will include elements from today’s world, it will primarily evoke a nostalgic aura.”

He adds that fans can expect to see one anthology horror film annually, complemented by linear (non-portmanteau) gothic horror titles reminiscent of *The Skull*. There’s also a link to the original company and its classic films in that the family of the late Subotsky (who died in 1991) has had direct involvement with the new project.

“I initially approached Fiona Subotsky, the widow of Milton, and expressed my deep passion and respect for [his] work, as well as his significant contributions to the unique brand of horror that Amicus Productions embodied,” says Brewster. “Soon after, I was introduced to [sons] Sergei and Dmitri. They were receptive to the idea of resurrecting Amicus,

but they were particularly concerned about ensuring it was done faithfully and respectfully, in honour of their father’s legacy and the company’s reputation.”

Following the portmanteau format that Amicus made popular, *In the Grip of Terror* will be comprised of four short stories, chosen by Brewster with help from Subotsky’s family. For his part,



NEW LEADERSHIP SPELLS A NEW DIRECTION FOR
THE REVIVIFIED HAMMER STUDIOS

HAMMER REBORN AGAIN

BY JAMES BURRELL

From the late 1950s to mid 1970s, Hammer Film Productions was the pre-eminent name in gothic screen horror, both in its native Britain and abroad, and was responsible for introducing Count Dracula, Baron Frankenstein's various creations, and a host of other monsters to a new generation of moviegoers. The films – which featured lavish production values mixed with fangs, wooden stakes, and throats splashed with bright red blood, all shot in vivid colour – generated millions of dollars at the box office, and made international stars of Christopher Lee, Peter Cushing, Oliver Reed, and Ingrid Pitt. Now, after several highs and lows during the company's nearly 90-year history, the venerable Hammer House of Horror has changed ownership once again with the recent purchase by prominent British theatre producer John Gore.

First founded in 1934, Hammer initially produced films in a variety of genres before making the black-and-white sci-fi horror-themed

The Quatermass Xperiment,

X the Unknown, and

Quatermass 2 in the

mid-1950s. In 1957,

the company turned

its sights to full-

fledged horror with

the production of *The*

Curse of Frankenstein,

starring Cushing

as Baron Frankenstein,

and Lee as his creation.

The following year saw the

release of *Horror of Dracula*

(UK title: *Dracula*),

with Lee as the bloodthirsty Count, and Cushing as vampire hunter Doctor Van Helsing. And in 1959, *The Mummy* hit cinemas, again starring Cushing as an archeologist and Lee as the titular threat. All were huge box office successes and led to other classics such as *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961), *The Reptile* (1966), *The Plague of the Zombies* (1966), *The Devil Rides Out* (1968), *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), *Hands of the Ripper* (1971), and *Vampire Circus* (1972), as well as numerous sequels to its Mummy, Frankenstein, and Dracula films.

Changing cinematic tastes in the late '60s and early '70s helped lead to Hammer's demise at cinemas, and after forays into television with two thirteen-episode TV series in the early 1980s, the company was finally laid to rest. But you can't keep a good horror studio down and, following a twenty-year hiatus, Hammer was resurrected in 2007 when it was purchased by a consortium led by Dutch TV producer John de Mol, with the company guided by CEO Simon Oakes. Several films were produced, including *Let Me In* (2010), an English-language remake of *Let the Right One In* directed by Matt Reeves, and starring Chloë Grace Moretz and Richard Jenkins; *The Resident* (2011), starring Hilary Swank and Jeffrey Dean Morgan;

The Woman in Black (2012), starring Daniel Radcliffe; and *The Lodge* (2019), starring Riley Keough.

In 2021, Hammer merged with UK-based distribution company Network Distributing to form Hammer Studios, Ltd. However, following the death of Network's managing director, Tim Beddows in 2022, the company was liquidated, according to entertainment industry news outlet *Variety*.

Gore, a multiple award-winning producer and owner of live theatre company John Gore Organization, was named one of the 500 most

influential business leaders in the media industry (*Variety*). The theatre mogul – who will take over the position of CEO of Hammer – will reportedly be making significant investments in the company, which will include the production of new films and other projects.

The first film to be released under Hammer's new ownership is *Doctor Jekyll*, a new take on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Directed by Joe Stephenson and starring Eddie Izzard as

the titular Dr. Nina Jekyll, the film – which had its UK premiere this fall – also features Scott Chambers, Simon Callow, and Lindsay Duncan.





Fresh Blood: British scream queen Megan Tremethick will appear in the new Amicus anthology *In the Grip of Terror* (above) and the company's new owners, Lawrie Brewster and Sarah Daly (bottom).

Brewster says he wanted to draw inspiration from Amicus' 1972 film *Asylum*, starring Robert Powell, a movie he says aligned most closely with production capabilities, and a style and tone they could best replicate.

"We decided early on that four stories, complemented by a robust wrap-around segment acting as an unofficial fifth, would provide enough narrative thrills and delights," he says. "Fiona, a doctor and respected child psychiatrist, was on board with this vision. As soon as she became aware of the theme Sergei and I were discussing, she quickly drafted a blueprint of ideas, suggesting stories that might be suitable for inclusion. I was taken aback by the quality of her suggestions, which wasn't surprising given that Fiona Subotsky is a fountain of knowledge when it comes to gothic horror."

Indeed, the elder Subotsky is the author of 2019's *Dracula for Doctors: Medical Facts and Gothic Fantasies*. Together, the creative team decided the new film would include adaptations of "A Diagnosis of Death" and "A Watcher by the Dead" by Ambrose Bierce, "And the Dead Spake" by E.F. Benson, and finally "Cool Air" by H.P. Lovecraft. *In the Grip of Terror* also has a confirmed cast that includes Laurence R. Harvey (*Human Centipede 2*), Megan Tremethick (*The Vance*

Institute), Michael Daviot (*Skeletons*), and Jonathan Hansler (*The Devil's Machine*). As with the original Amicus films, the movie will be set in the UK, particularly in Scotland.

As with previous productions from Hex Studios, Brewster and Daly are using crowdfunding platform Kickstarter (complete with a colourful, retro-styled poster that looks like it came right out of the early '70s) to raise funds and generate interest for the new film. The campaign, which began in September, is slated to run until November. Brewster says that crowdfunding is the best option today for fans to help support projects they feel passionate about.

"Why crowdfunding? The real question is: Why not?" asks Brewster. "Today, the vision for a film is deeply intertwined with its source of funding. So why not link the financing and production of the first Amicus

film in 30 years to the hopes and aspirations of fans who share my fervent passion for classic cinema? That's why there's no doubt in my mind about choosing the crowdfunding route. We've run several Kickstarter campaigns in the past. One reason we're fond of this platform is its advocacy for physical media. So, supporters can anticipate special edition Blu-rays packed with extras, official Amicus Productions T-shirts, posters, caps, and special bundle packages. This includes producer credits in the movie and even walk-on parts."

Apart from a few sprinkles of blood in the films, Amicus tended to refrain from delving into graphic violence and sex the way that some later-day Hammer offerings and films from companies like Tigon British Film Productions did. Brewster says that the new Amicus films also show restraint in what is depicted on screen – staying true to Subotsky's preference for atmosphere over gratuitous gore.

"With the abundance of gory options available today, does Amicus truly need to be excessively gory?" he says. "So, while our films will certainly contain horror elements, and occasionally gore, our primary emphasis will be on storytelling, atmosphere, and character development, honouring the true spirit of horror storytelling championed by Milton Subotsky." 🧛



SEPARATED GEOGRAPHICALLY BUT UNITED BY FILM, THE ADAMS FAMILY TAKES A DUSTY ROAD LESS TRAVELLED FOR *WHERE THE DEVIL ROAMS*



TO THE DEVILS, TWO DAUGHTERS

BY **ROCCO T. THOMPSON**

The last time we caught up with the Adamses, it was the eve of the release of *Hellbender* (2021), the lockdown-shot gem that graced the cover of *RM#204*, and since then, the genre at large has embraced the family filmmaking collective. This newfound notoriety in the horror sphere continually surprises the Adamses (comprised of parents Toby Poser and John Adams along with their daughters Lulu and Zelda) and put on a good deal of pressure for the inevitable follow-up. Their latest feature has finally arrived, having dazzled Fantasia Film Festival audiences last summer, but *Hellbender* fans shouldn't expect more of the same.

"We were ready to do a period piece and wanted to work some new muscles artistically," Toby tells *Rue Morgue*. "[*Where the Devil Roams*] is exactly the film we wanted to make, and if there are people in the room who don't dig it? I'm okay with that." She stresses: "It's our boldest film, our most brutal, but also the most loving and beautiful too."

Set amongst ramshackle sideshows and

frost-bitten backroads, the Great Depression-set fable follows Eve (Zelda Adams), Maggie (Toby Poser), and Seven (John Adams) — a family of serial murdering carnival performers who dream of headlining an event known as the Buffalo Horror Show. After Maggie and Seven are unexpectedly wounded while carrying out a home invasion, Eve steals the Devil's heart (yes, actually) from a magician who uses the infernal organ's healing properties to re-attach the fingers he snips off in his performances. But in her desperate bid to keep her family intact, Eve may have to sacrifice her very soul.

Readers will recall that the family had to scale back with the hermetically sealed *Hellbender* as the pandemic ramped up, and *Where the Devil Roams* gave the Adamses the opportunity to cut loose working on a larger scale. Still, it wouldn't be an Adams family project without calling in some favours and employing a generous dollop of good old-fashioned elbow grease.

"It was nice to get out our kind of claustrophobia and move around," says John, "we wanted



to widen the horizons of the screen. [But] it's [our] local roads, it's my dad's [old Chevy]. The carnival is just a dirty, muddy, beat-up carnival; it required me and Lulu to stand out in the snow and the rain and build it, sharing a pair of gloves."

Even on these smaller projects, the Adamses love to populate the screen with unique and unforgettable faces. *Where the Devil Roams* is no exception, with a diverse cast of carnies and innkeepers pulled from their own community of local weirdos.

"They're all people that we know from the punk rock world," says John. "We have to work with the right type of people, because when an actor shows up and they see this camera sitting on a cheap tripod and a shitty rock-and-roll mic on a mic stand, they're like, 'Wait a minute. What is this?' And they all were so nice to believe in us because we were like, 'Don't worry. It may feel a little silly but let's all take it seriously,' and they did."

From swapped spirits to shared appendages to everyone wearing multiple hats on set, in an Adams family joint, it's impossible to know where Toby and John end and their children begin. At the time of shooting *Where the Devil Roams*, the proud parents were looking down the barrel of an empty nest, as Lulu and Zelda left home to pursue higher education, in the UK and NYC respectively.

"I think we're really starting to realize that each of our movies is just a documentary about where we are at that moment as a family," explains John. "[Zelda] said, 'Hey, before I go to college, let's just make one more movie.' We thought *Hellbender* was going to be it for quite a while and [this story] just came out of the blue. It was a really fun movie to chase."

But *Where the Devil Roams* is as much about age and decay as it is about finding your voice as a young person. Human fallibility is front and centre in the film, as is an eyebrow-raising treatment of bodies that feels both thematically relevant and excitingly provocative in our current sex-negative climate. The film plays with nudity and trans imagery in a way that's earned grum-



Bloodlines: From cast to crew, an Adams family feature is a tight-knit team. From top left: the magician Mr. Tibbs (Sam Rodd) in the middle of his act; John and Toby compare battle scars; and Zelda directs a wartime flashback sequence.

bles from some across the festival circuit. The Adamses remain undeterred.

"We're all born naked, it's amazing how little we see ourselves naked, especially older people. I think it's important to represent people of all ages in their birthday suit," says Toby.

"We're told male genitalia is taboo, we can't see it, and yet we can see naked women all over the place," adds John, who graciously bared all in the name of his art. "I'm not asking an actor to do it so it's not objective, it's a subjective move."

As for the logistical nightmare of photographing your loins when you work in tandem with the fruit of said loins? Any responsible dad would agree that making your kids squirm is just good parenting.

"[The girls] took the night off; that was a composite shot where just me and Toby shot it [alone] together," he says with a laugh. "The first time Zelda saw it was at Fantasia with her boyfriend, so we got to embarrass them in front of 500 people, which was great!"

In its unique, ambling way, *Where the Devil Roams* shows the wander-happy Adamses at a creative crossroads. With both girls technically out of the house, the family continues to collab-

orate but is also trying their hand at outside projects. This past summer, the family got an interim agreement from SAG (Screen Actors Guild) and spent two weeks filming a new feature, *Fairy*, while Toby and John very recently got to head to Serbia to direct a Shudder-produced creature feature scripted by Lulu. While they're grateful for the gigs, it's clear that what John, Toby, and their two talented progeny want is to continue making films together.

"It was the first time we worked with a big crew with a big budget, and we got to answer a lot of questions about what we want to do as filmmakers," says John. "We wanted to [play] a family again [in *Where the Devil Roams*] because this is a story about love. There's nothing easier to play than me loving Toby."

As for what's next, perhaps John and Toby will conquer a Cassavetes-style marriage two-hander now that they have more time together?

"We have a lot of ideas percolating," says John. "We have three ideas, and it's just like the way it always works: the one that's ready is the soup that gets put on the burner. But I just want to film Toby." 🍷

CINEMACABRE

FILM + DVD + REISSUES



A CHRISTMAS GIALLO

THE SACRIFICE GAME

Starring Mena Massoud, Olivia Scott Welch and Georgia Acken

Directed by Jenn Wexler

Written by Jenn Wexler and Sean Redlitz
Shudder

The opening scene of *The Sacrifice Game* reveals yet another reason why Christmastime lends itself to horror: it provides a natural motivation for red and green *giallo*-style lighting. The influence of *Halloween* and the Manson murders is also felt in this prologue, though the film that follows brings some original twists to the holiday table.

Director Jenn Wexler's follow-up to *The Ranger* is set in 1971 at the isolated Blackvale School for Girls, where students Samantha (Madison Baines) and Clara (Georgia Acken) have to remain behind for different reasons while their classmates return home for the Yuletide break. Rose (*The Ranger*'s Chloë Levine), a teacher who sticks around to take care of them, tries to lift their spirits, but some serious anti-cheer is coming in the form of a cult of four



led by the wicked Jude (Mena Massoud). After a violent encounter on the road, this group takes refuge at Blackvale, and their presence there soon proves to be anything but random. They've got a sinister purpose to fulfill that's tied to the school's past, and the young women they find there are just what they need to help them accomplish their dark purpose.

Wexler and Sean Redlitz's screenplay takes a number of unforeseen turns as the gang's plot unfolds, and things don't go the way they've planned. The director and cinematographer Alexandre Bussi re make the most of their gothic location, and infuse *The Sacrifice Game* with a tone that marries '70s homage with modern sensibilities. Makeup effects supervisor Adrien Morot (*M3GAN*, *The Whale*) keeps the blood flowing, though the tone never becomes oppressively dark, and a sense of devilish fun is maintained throughout. A key contributor to that is Massoud – it's a kick to see the star of Disney's live-action *Aladdin* use his charisma for evil – though top acting honours go to Acken, as the withdrawn Clara responds to her life-threatening circumstances in unexpected ways.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

LIVIN' AND DYING THE DREAM

YOUR LUCKY DAY

Starring Angus Cloud, Jessica Garza and Jason O'Mara

Written and directed by Dan Brown

Well Go USA

Call me a pessimist if you will, but I'm willing to wager that there are few among us who, after seeing the words "Based on the American Dream" appear onscreen at the start of *Your Lucky Day*, would think "Oh good, this is sure to be an uplifting tale!" One's side-eye narrows even further when we're told the film takes place in the decidedly less-than-halcyon days of 2017. But let's see how it goes!

It's the holiday season at the local Sip 'n' Go convenience store, where a few customers go about their convenience store business. In the corner, a small-time drug dealer sulks. In the back, a department store pianist and his very-pregnant partner browse the ice creams. In the bathroom, a young cop does... whatever private business he's doing. And then there's the already well-to-do racist jerk, who scans his Mega-Ball Lot-



tery ticket and finds out he's won \$156 million bucks. One quick gunfight, locked door, hostage situation later, the survivors face a dilemma: do they report what happened, remaining noble and poor? Or do they concoct a story and split the lottery prize amongst the group? You can probably guess which option they choose, and that things don't go smoothly.

As is the case in any number of "small group trapped together in a difficult situation" movies, the characters in and around the Sip 'n' Go are a Village People's worth of types. But in this feature-length remake of his 2010 short film of the same name, writer/director Dan Brown is more interested in telling his characters' stories than he is in simply plunging them into a world of bullets and blood. They're further humanized by blessedly subtle and compelling performances, in particular those of Jessica Garza (*The Purge* series) as resilient waitress Ana Marlene and the late Angus Cloud (*Euphoria*) as the drug-dealing Sterling.

Though it sounds like a contradiction, *Your Lucky Day* is something of a quiet, intimate thriller, one that shows us bad people doing the occasional good thing and good people doing lots of bad things, all in pursuit of the almighty dollar. But hey, that's the American Dream for ya.

STACIE PONDER

BLIND AMBITION

DIVINITY

Starring Stephen Dorff, Scott Bakula and Karrueche Tran
Written and directed by Eddie Alcazar
Sumerian Records/Utopia

Writer/director Eddie Alcazar's *Divinity* bites off more than it can chew but earns points for ambition. Presented in stark black and white, the film (mostly) follows two strange brothers (Moises Arias and Jason Genao) as they descend to Earth and capture horny businessman Jaxxon Pierce (Stephen Dorff), who is responsible for changing humanity as we know it. How? Jax's father Sterling (Scott Bakula) invented some sort of chemical that allows people to stop aging and live



forever, dubbing the product "Divinity." More infomercial than *Death Becomes Her*, *Divinity* aims to question the viability of these changes on people and their impact on future generations on Earth.

This might sound cohesive and accessible but, in reality, *Divinity* is neither. The film is jagged and aggressive, with very little explanation of what is happening; it also depicts consumerism at its worst, but fails to develop its thought with any real nuance. While it is possible to generally follow the characters and their motivations, enjoyment of the experience requires patience with scant plot details.

The paper-thin story and characters are ultimately disappointing because *Divinity* has some truly strong points within its muddled structure. It's beautifully shot, exquisitely lit, and Dorff is doing his darndest in spite of spending most of the running time tied to a chair, slowly mutating. The biggest strength of *Divinity* is its world-building: the concept of chemically extending and preserving human life is not without dire consequences for our species, but the film merely flirts with those ramifications. The value of a person, their attractiveness, and self-worth would all shift drastically if aging and death were off the table. *Divinity* is at its strongest when it takes the time to grapple with the issues it brings up, but those moments are far too few and far between.

Highly stylized and visually vivid, *Divinity* is certainly ambitious. If only

that were enough.

DEIRDRE CRIMMINS

SATAN IS ALIVE AND WELL IN ARGENTINA

WHEN EVIL LURKS

Starring Ezequiel Rodríguez, Demián Salomón and Silvina Sabater
Written and directed by Demián Rugna
IFC Films/Shudder

If you were one of the many who were *Terrified* by Argentinean filmmaker Demián Rugna's 2017 sensation, rest assured he hasn't mellowed one bit. *When Evil Lurks*, his take on the possession genre, is as ruthless in its horrors as any movie in recent memory.

Don't look for any of the traditional exorcism-drama tropes here; indeed, it may be Rugna's sick joke that an exorcist (or "cleaner") is found torn to pieces in the first five minutes. This discovery is made by brothers Pedro (Ezequiel Rodríguez) and Jimi (Demián Salomón, also seen this fall in Rugna's segment of *Satanic Hispanics*), who live in a rural corner of a world where demonic infestation is a regular occurrence. As Pedro puts it, "Churches are dead," and with the cleaner destroyed and local law enforcement ducking



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OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: A CHAIN LETTER FROM LANCE!

A CHAIN ACROSS THE FACE



CHAIN LETTER

Image Entertainment

Seeing as climate change is setting the world on fire, I thought I'd cool things off. Remember when you were young and believed in stupid things like Santa Claus, unicorns, democracy, and chain letters? Those of you too young to know what the latter is – it's an actual piece of parchment with handwritten words that would be mailed to your home, telling you to pass it on to five or more people or something bad would happen. That's the gist of this thick flick featuring a bunch of campy college students who ignore a chain letter email and end up getting dispatched by a serial killer who offs them with... wait for it – a chain! So now that you've read the plot, consider yourself chained: watch this movie and recommend it to ten people and I *guarantee* you'll be friendless come next week.

BODY COUNT: 7

DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you see links of a chain

THE MARQUIS IN MEXICO



JUSTINE

Tetro Video

If you still want to play the chain letter movie game, you are totally going to get your ass kicked if you recommend this one to anyone, especially family members. Based on the Marquis de Sade's novel *Justine*, the movie follows a young girl who is kidnapped and tortured to rob her of her virtue – with extreme prejudice! This Mexican production directed by Alex Hernández is brutal and completely unforgiving. You are going to see things in it that you will wish you could unsee: necrophilia, rape, beatings, forced submission, cannibalism – all the things that litter newspaper headlines south of the border. What's worse is that it's all set to a classical music score featuring Beethoven – only *A Clockwork Orange* this ain't. So viddy well, my droogs... just don't forget your barf bag!

BODY COUNT: 4

DRINKING GAME: A shot every time someone vomits – including yourself!

THIS IS THE END



THESE FINAL HOURS

M.O. Pictures

For those of you who refuse to play along with my chain letter movie game – you've got about twelve more hours to live. That's the premise of this movie after an extinction level, world-ending meteorite strikes the Earth and the last place to go is the land down under – Australia! Armed with the knowledge that he has half a day left to do everything he needs to, our Aussie protagonist James sets off to meet up with his girlfriend for one last fling. Along the way he encounters child rapists, suicidal families, Jesus freaks, and a full-on orgy. What's a guy to do? Definitely the best of these three offerings, this one might make you seriously consider what to do with your last few hours. So long suckers!

BODY COUNT: 21

DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you see nakedness

any responsibility, the brothers and wealthy neighbour Ruíz (Luis Ziemkowski) take it upon themselves to deal with a grotesquely disfigured possessee. There are rules for such things, however, and when this trio breaks them, the ramifications are pretty awful right away, and manage to get even worse.

As our heroes try to stay one step ahead of the evil they've unleashed and protect their loved ones, only to visit unspeakable terrors upon them, Rugna unfolds a relentless narrative punctuated by genuinely horrifying set pieces. His matter-of-fact, one-thing-leads-to-another storytelling only makes the bursts of brutality and gore all the more impactful, with Marcos Berta's makeup effects guaranteed to make you squirm. So will the certainty, which becomes clear fairly early on, that absolutely no one is safe. Those who are sensitive about violence involving children and animals are advised to steer clear. Yet, however uncompromising *When Evil Lurks* becomes, it's never exploitative, and it immerses you fully in its merciless scenario. This reviewer is no big fan of explain-it-all prequels, so it's a compliment to say that this film made me want to see a follow-up feature dramatizing the backstory related in its second half.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

TENTH TIME'S A CHARM

SAW X

Starring Tobin Bell, Shawnee Smith and Synnøve Macody Lund

Directed by Kevin Greutert

Written by Josh Stolberg and Pete Goldfinger

Lionsgate

Who'd have thunk James Wan's feature film debut would spawn a franchise into the double digits? The *Saw* mill may have lagged after *Spiral's* lacklustre (and Jigsaw-less) performance at the box office, but 2023 presents a return to form for cancer-riddled civil engineer John Kramer, who finally gets an origin story worthy of a grumpy, demented boomer.

Taking place between the events of the first two *Saw* films, Kramer is grappling with his terminal diagnosis and the demands of his favourite hobby – kidnapping petty thieves, cheaters, and assholes, and giving them the opportunity to mutilate themselves in order to appreciate their lives – hey, it worked for recovered drug-addict Amanda (Shawnee Smith), returning here as Jigsaw's #1 fan/protege. When Kramer learns of an experimental cancer treatment out of Mexico, he books a flight and coughs up the pesos, only to learn that the whole thing is an ongoing scam orchestrated by the evil Cecilia Pederson (Synnøve Macody Lund) and her slightly-less-evil Mexican hired hands. They find themselves in Jigsaw's traps faster than you can say "refund my dinero;" twists and turns ensue. I always wondered what bone marrow must look like.

If my synopsis is a tad facetious, it's with the purest of intentions – *Saw* works best when it doesn't pretend to be anything more than



a showcase of two-bit dickheads getting their just desserts in new and novel ways. Whether you root for Kramer or the trapped pill addict Gabriela (Renata Vaca), who Amanda comes to sympathize with, it really doesn't matter – the lack of a line between hero and villain is entirely the point here. And if you (unlike me) are able to follow the entire franchise *Saw*nologically, this little backtrack in time presents a welcome return to form with characters you'll be surprised to find yourself happy to see again.

ANDREA SUBISSATI

FEAR THE GODS

V/H/S/85

Starring Freddy Rodriguez
and James Ransone
Directed by Various
Written by Various
Shudder

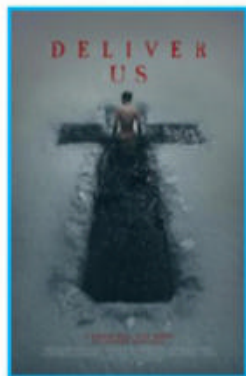


The sixth installment in the *V/H/S* anthology movie series includes five different segments, all found-footage tales set in 1985. Filled with plenty of gore, your mileage may vary depending on your tolerance for shaky, retro-style video footage.

The five stories are sometimes intercut, although the two best – Natasha Kermani's "TKNOGD" and Gigi Saul Guerrero's "God of Death" – are allowed to stand on their own, without being spliced throughout the other segments (coincidentally, both of these stories also centre on deities enacting terrible vengeance). The other three stories involve a detective (Freddy Rodriguez, *Planet Terror*) receiving videotapes of gruesome murders before they are committed, a scientist overseeing a university investigation of a strange shapeshifting creature called Rory, and a group of young people who choose the wrong lake to water-ski in.

"TKNOGD" focuses on a performance artist presenting a piece that incorporates early virtual reality (remember Nintendo's Power Glove?); when the artist calls on the new god of technology, she gives the applauding audience an experience they won't soon forget.

The standout chapter, though, is easily Guerrero's Spanish-language "God of Death," which begins with a live newscast in Mexico that's interrupted by a major earthquake. A group of survivors try to escape from the devastated television studio, but when the only way out is to descend, they soon come face to face with ancient ruins and the real reason for the quake: Mictlantecutli, the Aztec Lord of the Underworld, has resurrected and demands sacrifices. Guerrero's deft direction follows the nerve-racking tension of the escape through the falling building with



the terrifying reveal of the old god, also evoking a startling call to re-examine Mexican identity. This one segment, drenched in blood and thunder, is worth *V/H/S/85*'s entire run-time alone.

LISA MORTON

NUN AND DONE

DELIVER US

Starring Maria Vera Ratti, Thomas Kretschmann
and Lee Roy Kunz
Directed By Cru Ennis and Lee Roy Kunz
Written By Lee Roy Kunz and Kane Kunz
Magnet Releasing

The third film from World's Fair Pictures, *Deliver Us* holds alight the torch of nunsplotation's most sacred motifs, with enough nudity, brutality, and blasphemy to see co-directors Cru Ennis and Lee Roy Kunz kicked out of Sunday school for good.

In the film, a nun in a remote Russian convent named Yulia (Maria Vera Ratti) claims to have conceived twins the old-fashioned way (via immaculate conception). Worried that this is feeling a little too similar to an ancient Zoroastrian prophecy where a woman will give birth to the Messiah and the Antichrist simultaneously, the Vatican sends a group of priests to scope out and potentially correct the situation. Luckily (perhaps) for Yulia, Father Fox (Lee Roy Kunz), an American Jesuit on the verge of leaving the priesthood, takes notice and attempts to help her, but winds up adding a forbidden love triangle on top of everything she's already dealing with.

Where *Deliver Us* shines is in its first 30 seconds, where multiple beheadings, skinning, and backside nudity promise viewers an intense hour-and-42-minute ride, but sadly, the gore ends there (although some gratuitous nudity remains, especially for the leading ladies). Still, the film is a feast for the eyes with its desaturated, almost monochromatic tone with pops of red and gold, and for the ears via Tóti Guðnason's powerful and suspenseful score. Cinematographer Isaac Bauman was born to shoot horror, juxtaposing beautiful aerial shots of St. Petersburg, Russia, and the remote, snowy forest sur-

rounding the convent with close-up shots of the various characters' agony, and a sprinkling of badass kills too.

Pretty to look at but a little confusing, *Deliver Us* may not rank up there next to *Rosemary's Baby* or *The Exorcist* as a religious horror genre staple. Still, the film's aesthetic and aural buffet is well worth a visit.

ALYSSA HEATER

TECH NOIR

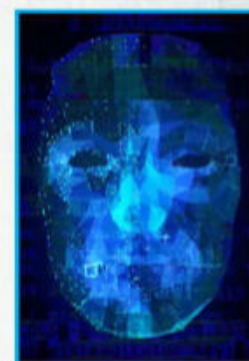
SO UNREAL

Starring Debbie Harry
Directed by Amanda Kramer
Written by Britt Brown and Amanda Kramer
Yellow Veil Pictures

It is logical that we should be interested in the future, because, as Criswell reminded us in *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1957), "that is where you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives."

Fear of what the future might bring is the subject of *So Unreal*, a documentary on cinematic depictions of threats brought by the rise of technology, cyberspace, virtuality, and A.I. Vividly designed as a feature-length video-essay, it cleverly selects Debbie Harry, star of Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, as its disembodied, hypnotic narrator. That pioneering and darkly prophetic gem is among those early 1980s films, together with *Tron* and *The Terminator*, which have defined both the themes and iconography of their pre-millennial descendants.

The non-stop analysis of features and trends connecting a wide scope of titles is accompanied by a barrage of film clips. While the featured titles are predominantly sci-fi and tech-thrillers like *The Matrix* and *Strange Days*, there is a hefty dose of cyber psycho-killers (*Virtuosity*, *The Lawnmower Man*, *Brainscan*, *The Cell*, *Ghost in the Machine*), body horror metamorphosis (*Darkman*, *eXistenZ*, *Tetsuo*) and killer droids (*Hardware*) to whet one's appetite for the horrific. After all, genre distinctions become pretty immaterial in a subject where fear and fascination are not



Deliver Us

SHORT CUTS

BITE-SIZED FRIGHTS
FOR SMALL APPETITES

ON THE SLAB: INTO THE WOODS

LOST

9:15 mins/YouTube via the [Tananarive Due channel](#)

Author Tananarive Due directs and stars in this short about a woman en route to a nature-filled team building retreat with her co-workers at a privately owned prison corporation. Upon arrival, she follows the trail to the appointed meeting spot, but her co-workers are nowhere to be found. What's worse, she continually finds herself turned around in the woods, always arriving back at the site where she started. As her unease builds, a deeper inner turmoil emerges about the guilt she carries over working for a system that profits off the misery of others, revealing a very personal connection to the way it can destroy lives. Due excels at building a deep sense of dread in spite of the fact that most of the action takes place in broad daylight, proving that our inner demons needn't always hide in dark corners.



TOGETHER

19:09 min/Vimeo via the [Ryan Oksenberg channel](#)

Ryan Oksenberg's short film offers the idea that even if you get out of the woods, you still might be lost. When Clayton (Clayton Farris) gets bitten by a feral man while camping with his girlfriend, he finds himself struggling with irresistible cravings for flesh and blood. To protect those around him, he applies for a biohazard remediation job run by Julia (Arielle Hader). Julia is lost in her own way, seeking to ease other people's trauma in an effort to cope with her own. Oksenberg imbues this film with an uncanny combination of heart, melancholy, and even a dash of gallows humour that will leave you wanting more time with these characters and pulling for any kind of happy ending. It's a film that reminds us that everyone's out in the wilderness, and we need to connect with people so that we don't have to go it alone.

100,000 ACRES OF PINE

6:29 min/YouTube via the [Alter channel](#)

In Jennifer Alice Wright's short, there are dark forces in the forest that can overcome even the most experienced wilderness travellers. Such is the case for ranger Megan Patel (Sarah Airriess), who becomes obsessed with finding her brother and fellow ranger Daniel (Lawrence Marvit) after he goes missing while investigating mysterious sightings in the woods. These characters seem to get lost in their own obsession with finding answers, as they keep pushing further while ignoring the ominous warning signs that quickly envelop them. Wright's use of stop-motion animation gives her the opportunity to play with surreal imagery, turning a familiar landscape into something increasingly terrifying.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

easily separated.

Perhaps the scariest aspect of *So Unreal* is the realization it brings: that beyond the somewhat dated visual effects and naïve concepts, the world we feared 40 years ago is the world we live in now, only not so picturesque. It is a well-argued crash course in tech-noir thriller/sci-fi-horror of the past four decades that picks the most relevant and still-alive threads to weave a dazzling tapestry of ideas and imagery, bright and fearsome at the same time.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

NOT BAD ENOUGH

GOOD BOY

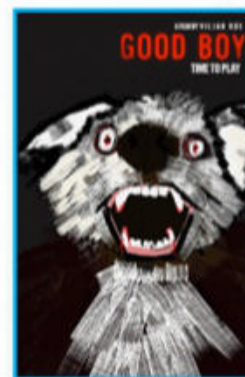
Starring Gard Løkke, Katrine Lovise Øpstad Fredriksen and Amalie Willoch Njaastad
Written and directed by Viljar Bøe
Saban Films

"Puppy play! Weird right?" kinda feels like where the pitch starts and ends for *Good Boy*, Norwegian writer/director Viljar Bøe's barely feature-length new thriller. It's not a bad starting point – the apparent (though imagined) nefariousness of kink subcultures has given us no shortage of memorable genre characters and moments – but even amongst its BDSM-curious cinematic brethren, *Good Boy* is so pitifully vanilla it couldn't even scare up an invite to a neighbourhood circle jerk.

The film stars Gard Løkke as Christian, a handsome young playboy who spends his days alone in a quiet mansion cooking, working out, and scrolling Tinder. After matching with Sigrid (Katrine Lovise Øpstad Fredriksen), an average, hard-working college student, the two decide to meet at a local café. Despite some initial discomfort, they hit it off immediately, extending their date into the evening. After spending the night together, Sigrid thinks Gard may be just the guy for her, that is until she meets Frank – a man in an eerie dog costume who lives his life on all fours as Christian's pet pooch. Initially taken aback, Sigrid almost too quickly learns to accept the strange situation as normal, until a trip to an isolated cabin with Christian and Frank reveals that not all is as it seems.

The way Bøe (who's also credited as cinematographer and editor) shoots and stages *Good Boy* is so uninvitingly drab that it's nearly impossible to tell whether the film is aiming for clean Scandi unfussiness or just lacks any real stylistic sensibility. The story – such as it is – is stretched to its snapping point with limp pacing and questionable character choices, which stick out all the more sharply when there's so little else to pay attention to. It does manage to conclude on a shocking though pretty tasteless note, as if the entire enterprise were reverse engineered to wind up where it does. It's almost nasty enough to make suffering the film's unbearable squareness worthwhile, but by that point you'll find yourself wishing *Good Boy* had found and flown its freak flag at least 60 minutes earlier.

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WRITER/DIRECTOR **PARIS ZARCILLA** TALKS ABOUT
THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT DROVE HIM TO CREATE
HIS FEATURE FILM DEBUT **RAGING GRACE**

FILIPINO FAMILY

BY **MICHAEL GINGOLD**

Growing up as the son of Filipino immigrants in the UK, filmmaker Paris Zarcilla witnessed racism firsthand in the way his mother, who worked as a cleaner and nanny, was treated by her white employers. Years later, during the pandemic, Zarcilla wound up looking inward, as many people did, trying to reckon with that past as well as the rise of Asian hate in the UK and do something constructive with his mounting rage.

"We had a National Health Service that was fronted by a lot of Filipino workers, and for whatever reason, they were dying in droves," he recalls. "And our government had an incredibly toxic attitude toward immigrants – the very people who were trying to save the British public. All of that got me to a place where I was so angry, and I didn't know what to do with that anger. I eventually directed it toward the page and wrote *Raging Grace*, essentially in reaction to everything I was going through."

Raging Grace, which won the Grand Jury Award at this year's SXSW festival and sees theatrical release December 8 from Brainstorm Media, is both a piercing examination of the immigrant experience in London and a frightening, surprising genre piece. Joy (Max Eigenmann) is an undocumented worker taking whatever jobs she can to afford a work visa promised by a shady fixer, while caring for her preteen daughter Grace (Jaeden Paige Boadilla). When she takes a gig as a live-in housekeeper for wealthy, condescending Katherine (Leanne Best), one of Joy's duties is to feed daily medications to Katherine's cancer-ridden, vegetative uncle Nigel (David Hayman). It's already an oppressive situation, and it gets worse as first Grace and then Joy witness evidence that Katherine and the house harbour dark secrets.

Those secrets, and the subsequent story developments, should not even be hinted at, as *Raging Grace* takes unexpected and frightening turns that remain rooted in the characters and their relationships.

"Witnessing my mother being spoken to in such disparaging ways, and experiencing these weird microaggressions myself, can be very difficult to

articulate or verbalize to somebody else," says Zarcilla. "That often feels like you're going crazy, which can sometimes be a horrific experience, and I wanted to be able to put that in the film."

Raging Grace isn't totally suffused in darkness, though; there are moments of levity, such as a sequence early on in which Grace sneaks in and out of different rooms to avoid Katherine catching her. Given the heavy subject matter, Zarcilla felt it was necessary to lighten the mood here and there.

"I love the idea of blended genre, and it's very present in a lot of Southeast Asian cinema," he says. "I just feel like it's naturally a part of how we've come to perceive the world: the dark and light existing at the same time in the same place. It was also reflective of my experiences with my mum; I was a menace to her, and sometimes she would find it funny, and sometimes she really wouldn't. This story just lent itself to those kinds of comedic moments. You're looking at two characters caught in quite an absurd situation, and sometimes the only thing you can do is laugh. I love being able

to play with those boundaries, and make the audience laugh one moment and cry the next and shit themselves five seconds later."

Though *Raging Grace* can be located within a subset of recent horror films dealing with the immigrant experience, including such acclaimed works as Remi Weekes' *His House* and Nikyatu Jusu's *Nanny*, Zarcilla believes there's still fertile and worthwhile ground to cover within the subgenre, and plenty of room to tell these stories in a manner that's as hopeful as it is heartbreaking.

"We've gotten to a place where the films that were coming out [on this subject] were so trauma-heavy, they didn't give any other cathartic release," he notes. "For a lot of us, there was a sense of trauma fatigue, and I felt that was happening on the executive side as well when it came to telling these stories. I believe that while we explore trauma in *Raging Grace*, we also found ways of transcending it." 🧠





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REISSUED & REANIMATED

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD



LOVERS OF *THE TERROR* UNITE ON NEW BLU-RAY

The Little Shop of Horrors has long gotten plenty of attention as a two-day Roger Corman production featuring an early Jack Nicholson performance, but a forthcoming Blu-ray from Film Masters may raise the profile of *The Terror*, made a couple of years later under vaguely similar circumstances and also co-starring Nicholson. Where *Little Shop* actually lensed its interiors in two days and one night, followed by two weekends of exteriors, *The Terror* was built around footage shot on leftover sets for Corman's Poe movie *The Raven*, featuring its star Boris Karloff, over the weekend before they were torn down. It then took nearly a year to complete, as a lineup of directors including Francis Ford Coppola, Dennis Jakob, Monte Hellman, and Jack Hill oversaw more filming, with Corman coming back at the end to guide one last bit of exposition.

The result, released in 1963, looks very much like the patchwork production it was, and may be most familiar today to many fans from its excerpting in Peter Bogdanovich's cult classic *Targets*. Set in Napoleonic-era France, it casts Karloff as Baron Victor Frederick Von Leppe, who resides in a forbidding castle. When Lt. Andre Duvalier (Nicholson) becomes fascinated by a young woman named Helene (Sandra Knight, Nicholson's soon-to-be wife), he follows her to the castle and discovers that Helene is the spitting image of the Baron's long-dead wife Ilsa. Assorted spookery and a big twist involving the

Baron follow, with Corman perennial Dick (billed as Richard) Miller appearing as the Baron's son and *Little Shop* star Jonathan Haze playing a local peasant.

Film Masters' 60th-anniversary Blu-ray, set for release December 12, sports an all-new HD restoration of *The Terror* from original 35mm film elements and an array of appreciative bonus features. These include an audio commentary by author/filmmaker C. Courtney Joyner and cinema historian Dr. Steve Haberman; Part Two of *Hollywood Intruders: The Filmgroup Story*, a documentary on Roger and Gene Corman's production/distribution company, by Ballyhoo Motion Pictures' Daniel Griffith (Part One appeared on Film Masters' Blu-ray of Corman's *Beast from Haunted Cave*); a featurette with Howard S. Berger analyzing the movie; and an insert booklet with original essays on *The Terror*. And for good measure, an HD print of *The Little Shop of Horrors* is added as a bonus feature, sporting its own commentary by Justin Humphreys and a "special guest" — more on him a little later.

"The film went through multiple rounds of restoration," says Krystal M. Vander Ark, executive director of Film Masters, "and we're excited to release the best version of *The Terror* to date. But what truly elevates this release is the wealth of contributors we have on board, from Ballyhoo Motion Pictures' continuation of *Hollywood Intruders* to Howard S. Berger's visual essay, which takes an extreme deep dive into the film.



We were extremely fortunate that some of our friends, who happen to be experts in the classic-film community, approached us and asked to be involved. How can we say no to experts who are as passionate about a project as we are?"

Griffith, who directed and edited *Hollywood Intruders*, notes, "The Filmgroup era is often neglected or downplayed by film scholars when discussing Roger Corman's body of work. Filmgroup's experimental, and somewhat prolific, output is the perfect primer for what would come later with New World Pictures. At least three of his own directorial efforts through the company [also including the William Shatner-starring *The Intruder*] are now considered

legendary cult films, which isn't too shabby either."

In addition to his commentary with Haberman, Joyner also served as writer and co-producer on *Hollywood Intruders*, and his contributions to this Blu-ray represent the culmination of a love for *The Terror* that began in childhood.

"*The Terror* was the perennial, the movie I grew up with; the movie for a rainy 1960s Saturday afternoon," he says. "It was always on the local Philadelphia UHF stations, probably because it was cheap to rent. For years, I'd catch it in bits and pieces, trying to figure out how the story with Boris Karloff and Jonathan Haze fit together, and failing. When I finally saw the film from beginning to end, on a small, portable black-and-white TV, I was still mulling through my twelve-year-old brain what it all meant, although the corridors and chambers of Baron Von Leppe's castle remained with me."

Back before DVDs and then Blu-rays changed the home-viewing experience, fans like Joyner had to make do with Super-8 and VHS editions of their favourite films. And in *The Terror*'s case, since it was never properly copyrighted and fell into the public domain, cheap videocassettes were everywhere during the format's boom years.

"Even in its most compromised form, *The Terror* still exerted a magic," Joyner recalls. "Maybe it was the combined talents of so many greats starting their careers by trying to make sense of something incomprehensible. Or maybe making story sense wasn't the point, but being swept away by mood was. If the movie had been made in a conventional way, not cobbled together by so many hands, would that mood be lost and *The Terror* become just another assembly-line AIP horror? Or is it the memory of rainy Saturday afternoons when *The Terror* was the only choice to be had? No matter the reason, *The Terror* endures."

Berger's contribution to the Blu-ray grew out of his and writing partner Kevin Marr's long-running blog *Destructible Man*. Its focus was on "dummy-deaths" – onscreen demises in which effects mannequins replace the actors – and their relation to the subtexts and meanings of the films containing them. These themes, according to Berger, include deception, transformation, illusion, dualities, and abstraction, surrounded by visual abstractions of humans: mirrors, photos, paintings, sculptures, dolls, etc.

"At one point, we decided that a mere blog entry was ill-equipped to illustrate all we had to say on the subject, and wanted to explore all that could be conveyed in video-essay format," he says. "The most mind-blowingly complicated and deceptive film we could apply our formula to was *The Terror*, a film that's *all* about duelling personas and illusions, deceptions and transformations, and dummy-deaths. So we wrote a script for it and planned to create it but, alas, day



jobs intervened and the project was temporarily shelved."

It was resuscitated after Berger was asked by Film Masters to record an audio commentary for its disc of Corman and Filmgroup's *Ski Troop Attack*. When he discovered that *The Terror* was on their schedule, he pitched the video essay.

"We were tired of the film being all too easily dismissed as a jumble and a misfire, etc., and Corman being dismissed as a thrifty producer who made grade-Z motion pictures that always turned a profit," he explains. "In actuality, Corman was an intellectual whose low-budget output was thematically consistent and structurally complex. *The Terror* is a rare specimen of Cor-

man farming out individual segments to several different directors, inadvertently creating a film that, beyond its convoluted, sometimes hastily patchworked storyline, is also metaphorically about its director! So, with this Blu-ray, we were able to find a welcoming home after all these years for not just this project, but our way of looking at films in general."

Full disclosure: This writer has liner notes in Red Shirt Home Video/Synapse Films' 4K UHD/Blu-ray release of Trick or Treat, which I covered last issue. That liner-notes assignment occurred after the article had been written and submitted for publication.



CAME FROM BOWEN'S BASEMENT



DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

Lights, Camera, Dysfunction
by John W. Bowen

You know those nights where you're like "Fuck it?" Yeah, okay, I guess that's most nights. But you know those nights where you're like "Fuck it, Imma just go on (*popular streaming service that shall remain unspecified here*), randomly pick some horror movie I've never heard of and just watch the bejeezus out of it and hope that it's worthwhile?" And you know how that rarely ever seems to work out in your favour? But once in a while it does. Like the night I said, "Fuck it, etc." and watched *Under the Bed*, a tense (but poorly marketed) little creepfest that came and went back in 2012 without eliciting so much as a quiet queef from the masses.

From Poe to King and far beyond, family conflict has surely provided as much fodder for our beloved genre through the years as religion, politics, sex, and the curious revulsion we feel for our own physical form. *Under the Bed* doesn't reinvent any wheels but gets plenty of mileage out of its characters' fractured relationships. As the title implies, the film concerns itself with a Bad Thing™ that lives under the main character's bed. Generic? Sure. Clichéd, even? Well, yeah. And truthfully, those aren't the film's only problems. In lesser hands, this confluence of issues might have been insurmountable, but director Steven C. Miller, writer Eric Stolze, and a very solid cast of virtual unknowns force *Under the Bed* to rise above itself.

Teenaged Neal (Jonny Weston) returns home after living with relatives for a couple of years following the fire that killed his mother. The incident is never fully explained but



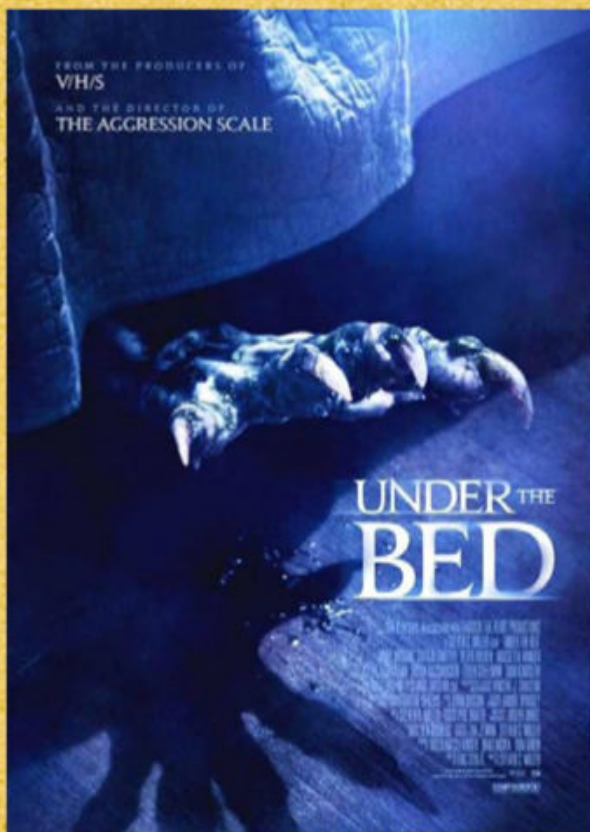
what we learn up front is that Neal's dad (Peter Holden) blames him for the incident, wants to forgive him but can't, and is convinced that several years of therapy haven't rendered him any more stable. Neal's main concern, however, is for his little brother Paulie (Gattlin Griffith), the one other person who knows that the aforementioned entity under Neal's bed is responsible for their predicament. Bonus: during Neal's absence, Dad has married Angela (Musetta Vander), an attractive, sweet-natured but largely clueless woman who just wishes everyone could get along. Oh, and they've moved Paulie into his brother's old room, so now he's under threat by the same nocturnal entity and... well, it's all a bit of a mess.

So exactly *what* lurks beneath the bed? Teenage hormones? Some manifestation of Neal's trauma over his mother's death? Paulie's angst over his own encroaching adolescence? Demonic dust

bunnies? We never really do get a satisfactory answer – a sagging plot point that some viewers find unforgivable – but Neal and Paulie ultimately realize that they need to defend themselves against this troublesome critter now and ponder the psychological implications later. And the one thing that's certain (as always) is that self-reliance is key here, because the Unbelieving Adults™ are gonna be about as useful as tits on a bull.

Reviewers have pissed and moaned about *Under the Bed*'s pacing issues and I can't completely disagree. We're a good twenty minutes in before the first jump scare, and there's no serious monster action until the final act, which gets surprisingly violent without warning. And great throbbing thrombosis, what a bad bastard said monster is! Imagine one of those critters from *The Descent* with third-degree burns and chronic scoliosis and you're halfway there. The effects appear to have been largely practical with a bit of CG tossed in for gloss and there's an actual actor credited as the monster in the end titles. Who even does that anymore? Miller and Stolze have recklessly thrown away untold marketing potential by not giving the monster a catchy name or funny lines, and for this alone I sing their praises.

I'm not sure where *Under the Bed* is streaming at the moment, but you're a resourceful bunch of miscreants, aren't you? Let the cyber-spelunking begin. Now get the hell out of my basement and I'll see you next year. 🍷



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FILES FROM THE BLACK MUSEUM

THE LONG SHADOWS OF CLASSIC HORROR'S PAST

BY PAUL CORUPE

Armed and Dangerous

"WHILE *THE UNKNOWN* WASN'T THE FIRST HORROR FILM TO SUBVERT AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS ABOUT NOBLE PROTAGONISTS, IT DOES PREFIGURE THE WAY THAT LATER HORROR FILMS HAVE MORE BOLDLY BLURRED THE LINE BETWEEN HERO AND VILLAIN."

Despite cinema's long history of anti-heroes, tragic figures, and problematic faves, it seems like some fans have been surprised by a recent run of films with main characters who behave in less-than-inspiring ways. This past year, there have been several criticisms of movies such as *Napoleon* and *Oppenheimer* based on the assumption that a film's protagonist – even a controversial historical figure – must always be portrayed as a valiant hero. Anyone who subscribes to this rigid view should probably spend more time with the horror genre, which has – almost since the beginning – centred on nuanced main characters with shadowy motivations. Just take a look at Tod Browning's morbid silent chiller *The Unknown* (1927), which was recently released by Criterion in a set alongside the acclaimed director's similarly themed *Freaks* (1932) and *The Mystic* (1925). In this early classic, the famed director plays with our notions of what it means to be a heroic protagonist in ways that could be revealing for modern audiences.

In this delightfully dark melodrama, Lon Chaney Sr. plays Alonzo the Armless, an amputee whose circus act includes using his feet to toss daggers at his beautiful partner, Nanon (Joan Crawford). Although Alonzo is romantically obsessed with the young girl, he hides his feelings and comforts her when she complains about being repulsed by the touch of men – especially the meaty hands of circus strongman Malabar (Norman Kerry). The problem is that Alonzo isn't all that he seems – a fugitive from the law, he actually has arms but keeps them hidden underneath his costume because of a telltale extra thumb that would lead to his arrest for the murder of Nanon's father (Nick De Ruiz), who owns the circus. But just as Alonzo blackmails a local surgeon into cutting off his limbs to complete the illusion, Nanon changes her mind about Malabar and agrees to marry him. As Alonzo realizes his mistake, he turns his murderous rage on the young lovers.

From his silent shockers right through to his celebrated classic *Freaks*, Browning was a horror director who often featured unconventional protagonists, including characters with dual identities, criminals in hiding, con artists, and cheats. *The Unknown* is among his most successful films in this



mode, as the protagonist and antagonist effectively swap places over the course of the story. Chaney initially portrays Alonzo as a talented performer with a brotherly affection for Nanon, but it isn't long before Browning's tale slowly peels back each rotten layer to uncover his diseased core of murder, carnal motives, and self-mutilation. Instead, it's the muscle-bound Malabar – dismissed as a cad in the film's early scenes – who emerges as the virtuous hero, redeemed by Nanon's love despite his earlier "busy hands."

While *The Unknown* wasn't the first horror film to subvert audience expectations about noble protagonists, it does prefigure the way that later horror films have more boldly blurred the line between hero and villain. After all, who are Freddy Krueger, Michael Myers or even *Terrifier's* Art the Clown if not the bloodthirsty protagonists of their respective franchises, who have risen to iconic levels despite never pausing for a self-reflective moment about the value of friendship? That's why it's so odd to see people comment on Ridley Scott's epic biopic *Napoleon* to pre-emptively warn viewers that, actually, the megalomaniacal military dictator wasn't just all warm smiles and cute puppies. Similarly, some lamented this past summer that *Oppenheimer* – a film explicitly about the titular character's moral quandaries of developing and exploding a nuclear weapon – could have done more to inspire kids to start a career in physics(?).

While it's true that a basic marathon of horror classics would do wonders to shift these viewpoints on how protagonists should act, even the most casual glance at Hollywood history tells us that characters can be so much more than allegorical stand-ins that dish out quote-ready lectures about the importance of family. While I can't recommend that anyone should look to Alonzo as any kind of role model, he remains entirely compelling because of the way his own ethics and morals have degenerated past any reasonable point. Alonzo and other horror protagonists may ultimately be flawed, but so are we, and catching a glimpse of our hidden selves in these characters' own dark moments can be far more life-changing than another two-dimensional animated character reminding us of the power of believing in ourselves. 🧛

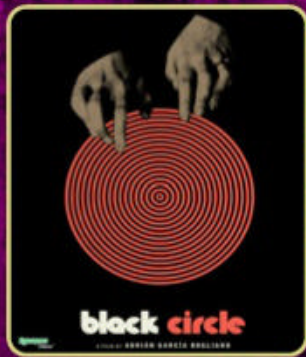
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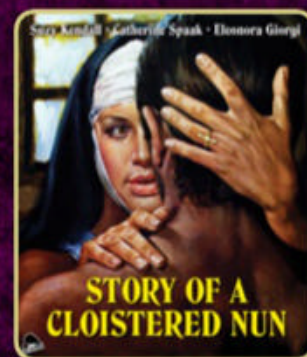
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FOOTPRINTS

Florinda Bolkan (A LIZARD IN A WOMAN'S SKIN) stars as a freelance translator who wakes one morning missing all memory of her past three days.

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STORY OF A CLOISTERED NUN

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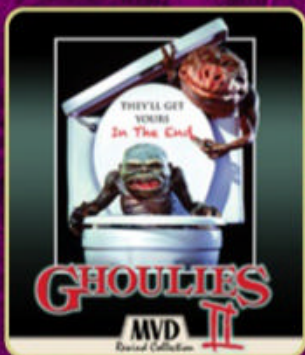
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IN THIS
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Jason McNamara
and Alberto Massaggia
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BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

With all due respect to entomologists, bugs are icky. Don't take my word for it: clearly the horror genre agrees with me as there has been no shortage of creepy crawlies on film, page, or video game console. An insect's ability to fascinate, repulse, terrify, and even amuse is unique in the animal kingdom due in no small part to their unpredictability, limitless variety, and downright alienness. All these elements can be found in *Skeeters*, a new comic miniseries in the tradition of B(ug)-movies like *Arachnophobia* and *Slither*. In it, giant mosquito-like creatures invade a sleepy rural seaside community, and before you can say, "I'm not cancelling the annual Kankakee Seafood Festival!" the populace is suffering from a bad case of bug bites – the kind that leave your insides oozing out. Looks like the town's salvation is in the hands of disgruntled sheriff Carla McCord and two hapless exterminators, Luis and J.J.

"Growing up I'd see horror movies like *Them!* and *Evil Dead II* and think that they must be having a blast behind the scenes with all that goop and gore," says writer Kevin Cuffe, citing just a

few of his inspirations for *Skeeters*, which is out December 6 from Mad Cave Studios. "Just the idea that these kinds of things can be gross, fun, and funny all at the same time; I think that's what drove us to make this kind of book. Why not try to translate that fun goopy mess into comics?"

Cuffe and co-writer Bob Frantz always intended *Skeeters* to be an equal mix of gags and gore, but the original scope of the project was much smaller: a quick and dirty twelve-page horror story. All that changed when the pair landed on artist Kelly Williams, who previously worked with Mad Cave on *Bountiful Garden* (2021-2022)

"We needed someone who could do fun and gross in equal measure, and that led us to Kelly," explains Cuffe. "Seeing Kelly's designs and his ideas going into the story let us flesh out (pun intended) a full story from the original short. When we started seeing the gory beauty in the watercoloured pages, we knew we made a good choice."

Readers will be hard-pressed to disagree. Williams clearly relished the gig and has served up a smorgasbord of entrails, eviscerated corpses, deformed mutated animals, giant insects, and of course, plenty of blood. But it wasn't enough for the creators to simply present another killer bug story just for its own sake.

"It's more about, what can we do with this kind of story that is different from other stories like it?" says Cuffe. "In *Skeeters*' case, it's more along the lines of subverting traditional horror tropes where women and POC characters tend to be the victims – in our story, these characters are the heroes and the victims are the residents of this town that is populated by more well-to-do white folks. So the thought was how creatively can Kelly kill off rich white people? And as you'll see, Kelly does a fantastic job of giving you all the gore that demographic deserves."

The creators also have a few narrative twists



Skeeters: A bug infestation of epic proportions, equal parts gags and gore.

regarding the origins of the giant killer insects. While an extraterrestrial connection is revealed fairly early on, it's evident there's more going on than just another bug hunt, alien or otherwise, by the end of the second issue. A change in scenery also gives Williams the chance to further flex his art muscles by channelling some good old-fashioned space-tech and slime-encrusted pods in the *Alien* tradition.

"As far as surprises go, you'll have to read all the issues," teases Cuffe. "I can say that Kelly made that task easy by presenting these horrors in beautiful watercolour so you won't want to miss a single blood-spattered, goop-fuelled panel."

FOLLOW PEDRO ON X @PCABEZUELO

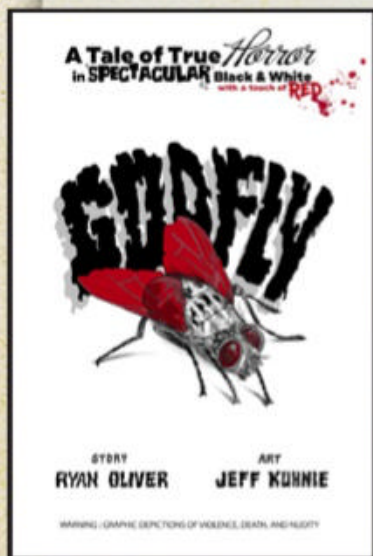


QUICK CUTS

The campers are easy pickings at *Camp Pickens*, the latest in Archie Comics' long-running *Chilling Adventures Presents* series. An entry focusing on a lethal summer camp has been a long time coming – the results, however, are a bit of a mixed bag. Consisting of three tales, the wraparound story "Bug Juice" has counsellor Jughead and a trio of kids tracking down some giant insects to secure a vital elixir. The strongest story, "Down and Out and Death Cursed," sees an oblivious Veronica more concerned with her comfort and social media presence than her fellow counsellors getting brutally massacred. Leaning the most heavily into *Friday the 13th* territory, this ditty is also the funniest and best paced. The eponymous "The Curse of Camp Pickens" is a more sombre outing as a campfire ghost tale becomes the backdrop to Betty's sinister fate. It's a bit out of sorts with the other two stories, and too talky for what amounts to a rather damp climax. Overall, the book is a fun outing but one can't help but feel there's a wasted opportunity by not focusing on one story and going the full Jason route.



In 1940s Middle America, a couple of bored kids wander into a flea circus tent at the local carnival where they're treated to a rare sight: the blood-winged Godfly, an insect that can magnify and manipulate the emotions of those around it to devastating effect. These abilities are put to the test when the children inadvertently set it free, unleashing a series of events steeped in chaos and carnage. Two things immediately stick out about *Godfly*: first, it's a clever twist on the killer bug subgenre, with the devastation coming not from the



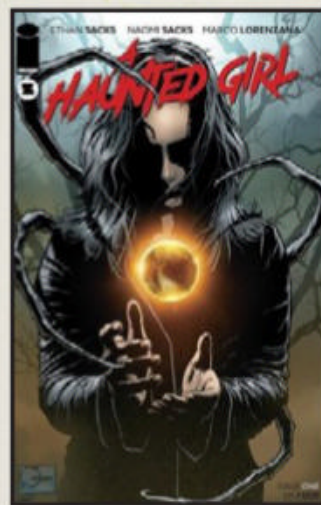
insect itself, but rather those around it. Second, the art instantly grabs the reader's attention and telegraphs that they're in for a wild ride. With several full-page spreads, innovative layouts, and strategic splashes of red amid mostly black-and-white art, it makes for a unique and engrossing experience.

Being burned alive is one of our most intense primal fears, which the creators of *Charred Remains* clearly understand. Horrific imagery of uncontrollable fires and burnt corpses, effectively conveyed by Andrea



Mutti's grisly art, traumatize the readers as much as the characters on the page. This being a horror comic however, there's an additional supernatural twist to these conflagrations in the form of the "Fire Man," a strange force that manifests itself in the very flames it creates. Narrowly escaping a deadly fire as a little girl, Amy is convinced the Fire Man is real and has devoted her life to tracking him down and putting a stop to his pyromania. Whether this is feasible – or all a delusion caused by Amy's trauma – remains to be seen, but regardless of the outcome, the first issue firmly reestablishes fire as a catastrophic force of nature that demands your fear.

Sixteen-year-old Cleo is recovering from an attempted suicide due to depression. Despite plenty of therapy and support from friends and her adopted father, she's having a hard time putting her life back together. And the ghosts don't help either. Are these terrifying visions a product of her breakdown or is she literally *A Haunted Girl*? The majority of the first issue is spent acquainting the reader with Cleo, yet does not fully divulge the details that led to her current predicament. While this maintains a level of mystery it also makes it hard for readers to get a full grasp on the character, as we don't know



what she was like prior to her breakdown. Though this doesn't rob us of empathy, it does prevent us from fully embracing her or – depending on your own mileage – caring about what happens next.

One of the most fascinating things in recent horror comics is watching how creators take advantage of new technological and social trends and adapt them to the format. On the surface, *Past Tense* is a fairly straightforward

futuristic thriller: Ashley learns the identity of a notorious serial killer and plays a deadly cat-and-mouse game to avoid becoming his next victim. The wrinkle, however, is time, as Ashley works for a company that sends surveillance drones back in time to record any moment in history the client wishes. In this case, killer Silas Green wishes to watch his past murders, seemingly to relive his glory days, but he reveals an even more sinister purpose when he specifically chooses Ashley as his guide. We haven't exactly mastered time travel yet in real life, but *Past Tense* effectively taps into our society's preoccupation with surveillance and capturing every moment, regardless of how intimate. 🕸



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MODERN OCCULTISM

Mitch Horowitz
G&D Media

Taking on the entire history, theory, and practice of modern occultism is no small feat, and *Modern Occultism* is no small book. Coming in at 413 pages (omitting the index), this hefty text is not concerned with merely touching on the history of tarot or modern witchiness. It does touch on such things, but it also takes those topics and folds them into intelligent and accessible histories.

Endlessly well-versed author Mitch Horowitz goes back to the early Greek, Roman, and Egyptian times to add flavour and context to the discussion that takes the reader all the way up to present day. This may seem like an unnecessary throwback for a book that promises a focus on modern occultism, but the early chapters serve not only as a foundation for the discussion of history and religion, but also as a dive into the etymology of many words and phrases that are vital to understanding the rest of the book. From there, it steps through eras leading from those ancient days to present times.

Horowitz's approach to the material is impressively thorough. Each chapter loosely arranges the threads of occult history throughout civilizations, rulers, economies, and locations. These threads are used as touchstones throughout the book so that readers can easily understand how each esoteric idea is reshaped and used in each period. The prose can get dense, and the swaths of topics broad, but *Modern Occultism* is still remarkably penetrable. It has the feeling of sitting with your smartest friend and hearing them describe their scholastic pet project, excitedly adding colour and context to the next nugget of information.

No single book can be unequivocally comprehensive on a single subject, but *Modern Occultism* feels pretty darn close. The fluency Horowitz brings to the topic, and his obvious interest in education and myth-busting make this an easier read than a solely academic text. All the same, this book is just as detailed and exhaustive as those drier ones.

DEIRDRE CRIMMINS

THE WILLOWS AND OTHERS:
COLLECTED SHORT FICTION, VOLUME 1Algernon Blackwood
Hippocampus Press

It's a safe bet that most lovers of horror possess at least one "best of" collection of Algernon Blackwood's tales. No anthology of horror classics is complete without "Wendigo" and "The Willows" (which, according to Lovecraft, are the finest weird tales ever written). However, there is a wealth of treasures beyond the same dozen stories repeatedly anthologized: Blackwood is distinguished from his best contemporaries not only by his voluminous output, but also by the higher degree of worthy tales. And thanks to this ambitious endeavour by Hippocampus, readers can enjoy this author's *collected* short fiction, at long last, in six volumes.

The first two are already out, featuring tales from 1889-1907 and 1908-1910, respectively; volumes 3 and 4 are planned for 2024, and volumes 5 and 6 for 2025. Expertly edited by S.T. Joshi, with generous help from Blackwood's highest authority, Mike Ashley (who provided several previously unknown tales), and graced with appendices (Blackwood's rare essays), the first two volumes reveal the writer's chronological growth into a major master of horror. Next to the stories which deserve to be better known, such as "The Listener" (about a leper's ghost) and the chilling "The Empty House," the first volume offers discoveries like "A Haunted Island," which was inspired by the untenanted wilderness of Canada, where the author undertook numerous camping trips, and which also birthed "Wendigo." Another rarely anthologized gem found in Volume 1 is the serial killer novella *Max Hensig—Bacteriologist and Murderer*, surprisingly ahead of its time. Among the many novelties to be discovered in Volume 2, *The Nemesis of Fire and Others*, is the memorable novella *The Lost Valley* about a haunted landscape.

Meticulously presented collections like these prove that Blackwood's oeuvre remains worthy to be (re)discovered. Greatness such as Blackwood's is not to be cherry-picked but binged through in its entirety, making *The Willows And Others* required reading.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

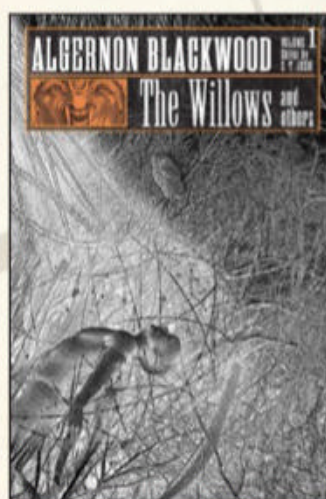
FRIGHTFEST GUIDE:
MAD DOCTOR MOVIESDr. John Llewellyn Probert
FAB Press

He was inspired to become a mad doctor by a childhood screening of 1958's *The Fly*, but there is no evidence to suggest that Dr. John Llewellyn Probert actually is one. But the British urologist/author is definitely an expert when it comes to mad doctor movies, one whose sense of humour and knowledge of the genre and medicine make this FrightFest guide both educational and entertaining.

Prefaced by a fun (if self-serving) foreword by *The Human Centipede* director Tom Six, *FrightFest Guide: Mad Doctor Movies* surveys the cinematic intersection of horror and science fiction chronologically, from 1920's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* up to 2022's *Morbius*. Not surprisingly, there is a heavy emphasis placed on *Frankenstein*-related titles, adaptations of H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and, yes, lots of David Cronenberg.

Probert's writing displays a deep knowledge of horror and science fiction literature and film, but what makes this guide unique (and profoundly amusing) is his ability – and admitted need – to point out the movie medical mistakes that drive him, well, mad. Examples include an X-ray shown both upside-down and the wrong way around in 1974's *Frightmare* and Udo Kier fucking life in the gall bladder in 1973's *Flesh for Frankenstein...* but doing so on the wrong side of Dalila Di Lazzaro's abdomen. He also gives credit where credit is due, lauding the realistic anatomy prosecutions in 2000's *Anatomie* and the "solid science" of 2012's *Errors of the Human Body*.

Handsomely illustrated with film stills and advertising art, *FrightFest Guide: Mad Doctor Movies* is also a great resource for fright film fans looking to discover titles they may





have never heard about. Probert's enthusiasm has me looking forward to 1959's *Black Pit of Dr. M*, 1962's *The Witch's Mirror*, and 1989's *The Dead Pit*, among many others.

SEAN PLUMMER

THAT NIGHT IN THE WOODS

Kristopher Triana

Cemetery Dance Publications



Kristopher Triana's latest offering unravels like a dangerously taut ghost story told on a crisp autumn night, with each chapter marching relentlessly closer to terrible truths that are best left behind in the proverbial ashes of time.

For the five childhood friends who reunite in a town they spent a lifetime trying to forget, the connective tissue forever binding them is the shared knowledge of what happened one Halloween night in Suicide Woods. When the group gathers for a reading of the last will and testament of a recently departed friend from their past, old scars become new fractures as a familiar fear seeps back into their lives. Despite any lingering trauma, they all thought they could outrun the nightmare from that long ago night. However, at the bequest of their dead friend, they will soon learn that there are things in this world – terrible things – they can neither outrun nor completely push back into the darkness from which they came.

Triana navigates various timelines with fully fleshed-out characters we're almost happy to be lost in the woods with. That is, of course, until we come face to face with the horrible things lurking in the shadows. Readers would do well not to get comfortable thinking they know what may be hiding behind the next tree.

While the finale may not satisfy those in want of absolute understanding, it also doesn't need to. No matter how you digest the *That Night in the Woods'* ending, there's no denying the lingering hold of Suicide Woods and the dreadful reality of what lies within – even long after you think you've escaped.

RICK HIPSON

VAMPIRES OF EL NORTE

Isabel Cañas

Berkley

Every February I invite folks to recommend their all-time favourite horror-romance stories to me, but this coming Valentine's Day, I'll be bringing a new rec of my own: Isabel Cañas' *Vampires of El Norte* – an immaculate, well-paced, compelling novel that not only co-mingles horror and romance successfully, but also historical fiction and western/adventure.

In her sophomore release, the Mexican-American author takes the folkloric creature El Cuco and blends it with vampire mythology against a backdrop of the start of the Mexican-American War in 1846. Nena and Néstor were close childhood friends, despite their different classes. It

DANTE'S PICK



THE SECRET LIFE OF INSECTS AND OTHER STORIES

Bernardo Esquinca

Valancourt Books

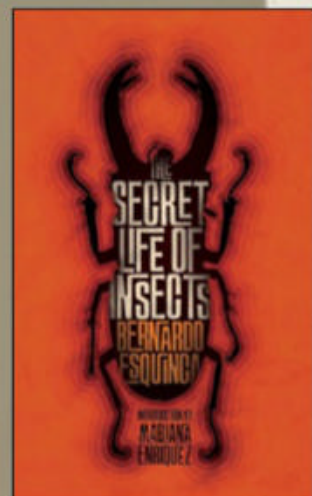
Mexican author Bernardo Esquinca had his big international break in *The Valancourt Book of World Horror Stories* [RM#197]: his tale "Señor Ligotti" ended up a finalist for the prestigious Shirley Jackson Award. The present volume offers, for the first time in English, a "best of" selection from his collections published in Spanish between 2008 and 2020.

Two qualities immediately stand out: first, the masterful use of the short story form, and second, a wide variety of themes and attitudes. Most of these gems are around ten pages long, but what they achieve in such condensed space is nothing short of amazing. Take the titular tale: its five pages suggest a wealth of terror and implications about an entomologist's relationship with his mysteriously murdered wife. Or "Dream of the Fisherman's Wife": seven pages brimming with marital distrust, paranoia, and (male) insecurity. "Come to Me" brings a morbid-existential variation on the "be careful what you wish for" trope, when a woman hires a witch-doctor to make a particular man love her forever. "Where I'm Going It's Always Night" is an open-ended five-pager dealing with the impossibility of knowing one's fellow human, here a hiker who may be rescuer, or killer, of people trapped in a nearby cave.

Not all the entries are as short, though: two novelettes included prove that Esquinca is equally adept on a larger canvas. "Demoness" depicts a convoluted reunion of old friends with a demonic possession episode still haunting them from their shared past. "Pan's Noontide" contains a novel's worth of eco-terrorism, weird masturbators, evil fairies, ritual killings, Pan-worshipping sects, and failed relationships.

This tales in *The Secret Life of Insects* are fresh, spicy, literary, provocative, often chilling, sometimes shocking, but always with a clever, well-thought-out point that provides a lasting resonance. The exquisitely detailed illustrations by Luis Pérez Ochoa are the cherry on top. Don't miss it.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ



NEW ANTHOLOGY **CHRISTMAS AND OTHER HORRORS**
WRAPS ITS UNSETTLING ARRAY OF GIFTS IN LESSER-
KNOWN TRADITIONS AND FOLKLORE

HAUNTED HOLIDAYS

BY **MONICA S. KUEBLER**

IF AFTER ALL THE HOLIDAY BOOZING AND SCHMOOZING, FAMILY AND FESTIVITIES, GIFTS AND GOOD CHEER, you're the sort who prefers to come home and cleanse that saccharine schmaltz from your system with something certifiably creepy, you'll want to add *Christmas and Other Horrors* to your wishlist. The stories in this new anthology take their inspiration from a range of holiday traditions and folklore, but one thing you won't be unwrapping is that pulpy Christmas staple: Killer Santa. A trope that's so popular here in North America, editor Ellen Datlow suggests, because it's so easy to grasp and exploit.

"I encouraged the writers to use less common traditions from around the world," Datlow explains. "I wrote each potential contributor that I wanted horror stories connected to the time of year rather than to the Christian Christmas. I included notes about various darker international traditions, and that seemed to do the trick. There were some traditions less familiar to Westerners that I'd hoped might inspire potential contributors, yet no one wrote about them."

Despite no one taking Datlow up on her specific challenge, *Christmas and Other Horrors* (out now from Titan Books) is undeniably diverse, spanning oceans and continents. Equally diverse is the subject matter. Within the eighteen tales that comprise the book, there are robbers masquerading as holiday revellers who get much more than they bargained for (Alma Katsu's "His Castle"), steep prices to be paid when a longstanding family Hanukkah tradition is not followed (Glen Hirshberg's "Dry and Ready"), and unseemly secrets to be drawn out by the in-laws (Josh Malerman's "Löyly Sow-na"). Each is followed by a brief note from the author, speaking to either the story's inspiration or the process of writing it; several of these afterwords are surprisingly personal.

"Even though I always begin soliciting stories for a new anthology with an eye to what it's going to encompass, I'm usually surprised by how it evolves from that starting point," notes Datlow. "As stories come in and I accept them (although I don't accept everything), the shape of a given anthology evolves."

To this end, *Christmas and Other Horrors* evolved to encompass tales of witchcraft (John Langan's "After Words"), the party-crashing ghost of a murder victim (Nadia Bulkin's "All the Pretty People"), and a priest who suddenly finds himself being made the sacrifice (Nick Mamatas' "The Blessing of the Waters"). Collectively, the anthology's contributors, which also include Stephen Graham Jones, Christopher Golden, Richard Kadrey, Tananarive Due, and Cassandra Khaw, make the connection between the so-called happiest time of the year and all manner of sinister goings-on seem as natural as gingerbread and eggnog. Of course, that shouldn't be surprising given that horror has danced with the holidays for hundreds of years. In the Victorian era, for instance, Christmas ghost stories were a popular oral seasonal tradition.

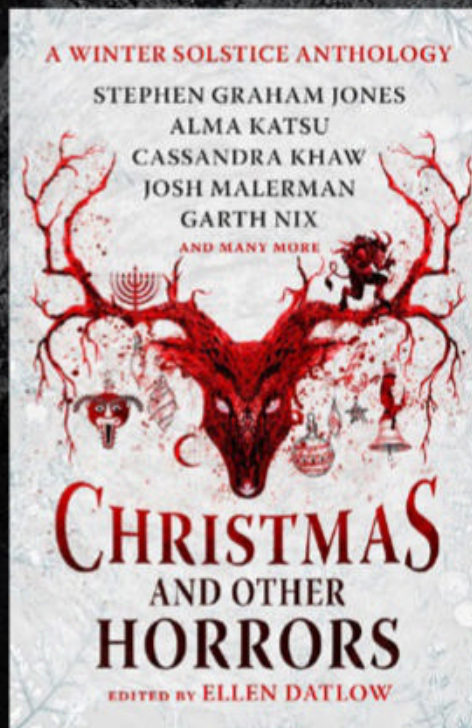
The stories in *Christmas and Other Horrors* are similarly suited for those long, dark, midwinter nights, due in no small part to the fact that Datlow, a celebrated editor and anthologist, has a clear opinion of what makes a successful seasonal horror tale.

"First of all, it needs to have the element of any good horror story: a sense of dread," she explains. "But also, there needs to be some relationship of the story to the season – I'm pretty broad-minded, although for at least one story I accepted, I asked the writer to tie their plot a bit more obviously to the solstice. I don't insist that the holiday take the forefront in the story, which I admit might be cheating, but if I love the story, so be it. The winter solstice holidays can be fraught with so much emotional baggage depending on one's

relationships to family that it almost seems a natural for horror."

As for what frightens Datlow most about the holiday season, it isn't Austria's Schnabelperchten or Australia's mawkin (scarecrows) – both of which make appearances in *Christmas and Other Horrors* – it's something much more mundane and relatable and out there right now.

"Not exactly scary, but definitely horrifying," she says. "Christmas creep. It used to be that Christmas wasn't being touted until after Thanksgiving. Now stores already advertise Christmas pre-Halloween... even in September." 🎃





was an increasingly impossible situation for the pair even before the monster attack that Néstor has long believed left Nena dead and drove him from Los Ojuelos when he was still a boy. He's been moving ever since, working as a *vanquero* (cowboy) for hire.

What Néstor doesn't know is that Nena survived, and the pair are about to be set on a collision course as the *Yanquis* (Americans) push southwards. Being adults now only complicates things further, as do the nine years of resentment that have been building up in Nena, and

then there are the monsters, which seem to be hunting the community's strongest men with shocking precision. The novel takes Nena and Néstor all the way up to the front lines of battle before they figure out how it's all connected – not that they'll be believed.

Nena's choices/actions occasionally border on frustrating yet are likely in line with those of a woman of her era, and ultimately don't diminish from *Vampires of El Norte's* status as a consummate page-turner; one that will no doubt earn Cañas fans across multiple genres. Come for the vampires and the setting, but stay for the love story, which doesn't involve anyone romancing bloodsuckers for a change.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

THE SERPENT'S SHADOW

Daniel Braum

Cemetery Dance Publications

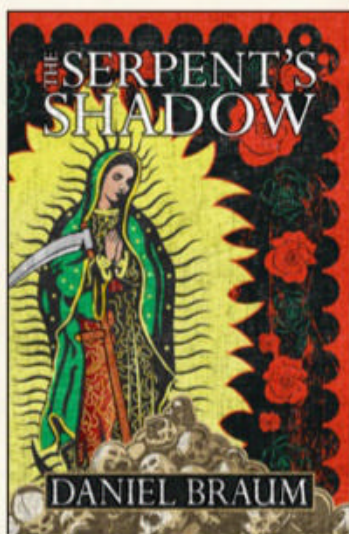
Set in the exotic paradise of Cancun, Mexico, seventeen-year-old David is ready for whatever adventure awaits him during the vacation of a lifetime. David's youthful optimism and innocent naivety, however, soon become irrevocably altered after meeting fellow vacationer Anna Marie, a beautiful young woman whose magnetic allure he can't quite put a finger on. Through her influence and guidance, our young protagonist bears witness to things not easily explained within the confines of a reality he thought he understood.

Taking full advantage of a place he frequented in his own youth, author Daniel Braum deftly connects readers to the sights, sounds, and smells of the tropical locale and surrounding jungle. Expect to be transported to a land that can barely contain its secrets while balancing on a razor wire between civilization and the untamed natural state of its Mayan heritage.

Whether the author is describing a picturesque landscape or the altered perspectives within his mind's eye, perfectly executed nuances are scattered like breadcrumbs along the way to build an increasing sense of unease with every new encounter. From the stoic hotel staff to the amicable cabbie to the doormen standing guard at the clubs, one can't help but feel that something's not quite right about any of them. Exactly what dangers they may be hiding or protecting is the question that will keep readers turning pages as quickly as they can.

Although David never asked to be a hero nor a sacrificial lamb, he finds himself wedged within the fate of a nation desperate to shed its skin for better or worse. And while Braum's unique blend of quiet horror may be subtle, by the time the finale erupts into a violent maelstrom of apocalyptic consequences, you'll likely regret sending out that "wish you were here" postcard upon arrival.

RICK HIPSON



LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

GETTING TACTILE WITH TARTARUS

It was a whole different world when I began writing for *Rue Morgue* in 2002. Social media was in its infancy (MySpace wouldn't launch until a year later) and YouTube was still three years away. Review copies came in paper form, so I'd have to travel to the office to pick up my assignments.

I can't say whether those days before the internet and digital-everything were better, but there is something to be said about holding a physical book in your hands. Being able to flip it over and peruse the cover, front and back; feel the thickness and quality of the pages; sample a sentence or paragraph from some random point in the middle – this tactile experience just isn't something that can be replicated by a PDF or eBook. Sure, some might argue that this sensory contact isn't so important because the true magic is the story itself, but I think it's more complicated than that.

Last year, when I was preparing to interview Chet Zar about *Dystopia*, his glorious oversized artbook collecting two decades of his sinister creations, he insisted that he send me one. He explained that it was a thing that needed to be experienced in its physical form, and he was right. Holding that monster tome of monsters and working my way through its thick, glossy pages rendered indisputable the blood, sweat, and tears that went into the project. The art book was itself a work of art.

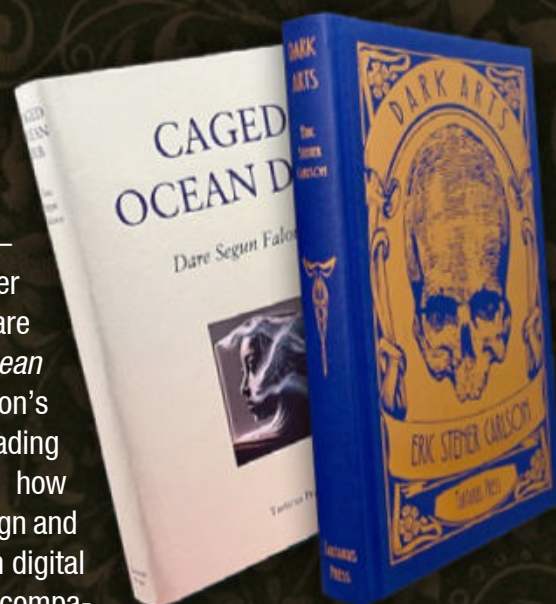
For another example, we need look no further than the offerings of British independent publisher Tartarus Press, who recently mailed in a trio of titles – among them, two hardcover short story collections, Dare Segun Falowo's *Caged Ocean Dub* and Eric Stener Carlson's *Dark Arts*. Before even reading a single word, it's obvious how much care went into the design and production of these books. In digital form, the cover art and accompanying text set on a cream-coloured matte background may seem like nothing more than a deceptively simple way to make a publisher's releases feel cohesive, but the experience of holding the printed paper shifts perception dramatically: these aren't merely books to be devoured and discarded, they are weighty, substantial volumes meant to be collected and displayed, shelved right next to your other fine library editions. Oh, and if you remove the dustjackets, there is even more artwork lying in wait.

The editing and interior layout are similarly immaculate, perfectly complementing Falowo and Carlson's stories, which are well worth seeking out; the kind of moving, unsettling, striking tales you can easily imagine yourself revisiting on a stormy day or placing beneath a Christmas tree for a horror-loving friend (now, just try that with an eBook).

Happy holidays!

MONICA S. KUEBLER

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THIS MONTH:
THE VINTAGE VISIONS OF MEAGAN MELI

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Few people celebrate Halloween the way Meagan Meli does; her colourful creations evoke a time past when spooky and playful come together to tickle the imagination. Her bright spectres, menacing jack-o'-lanterns, and jet black cats are equal parts ghastly and gleeful, reminding us that there is much joy, colour, and whimsy at the heart of the season. Once you enter Meli's autumn world, you'll never want to leave.

NAME

Meagan Meli

HOMETOWN HAUNT

"I am from Gravesend, Brooklyn, New York. Yes, it's a real place! It's home to the local poltergeist (and founder) Lady Deborah Moody, and a small 17th-century graveyard."

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"My paintings are made with Acryla Gouache paint, which is a hybrid of acrylic and watercolour paint. The single most important part of preparing my drawings for paint is separating each aspect into layers, literally. I separate the background, mid-ground, and foreground into different layers. After each layer is painted in, I do the finishing touches. I use a lot of sponges and stiff bristle brushes for textures."

DEEDS

"I had the honour to participate in a 200 Years of Sleepy Hollow exhibition at Muzeo Gallery that placed my artwork in the same show as Mary Blair, who is an enormous inspiration to me and my art."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"Inspiration is mostly found in vintage Halloween, cemetery/tombstone symbolism, textures found in nature, and background art in early Disney animations."

LAST WORDS

"My favourite piece of advice is to always create for yourself, let it happen organically, and have fun with what you do. Creating anything is an intimate, magical process – let it be for you before anyone else."

RESTING PLACE

Find Meagan Meli on Instagram @MeaganMeli and at shop.meaganmeli.com.

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A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVILS IN THE DETAILS

BY
STACIE
PONDER

THERE IS VERY LITTLE IN THIS
WORKADAY WORLD OF OURS

that fills me with as much slack-jawed, heart-eyed delight as the pitter-patter of tiny little feet. I'm referring, of course, to the pitter-patter of tiny little killer doll feet echoing through the halls as they scamper around the household tormenting their victims. I'm sure I'm not alone amongst bad doll aficionados when I say that my love of them stems from seeing *Trilogy of Terror* at a formative age. Watching the legendary Zuni fetish doll bare all 300 of its wooden teeth whilst menacing the equally legendary Karen Black can really set one on a path in life, let me tell you. While I'm not sure exactly where that path will lead, I can say that there is a small part of me that hopes it culminates at the business end of a knife wielded by something like that Zuni fellow. It would be a true death by a thousand cuts (the blade would be but wee, no?) but I would go with a smile on my face, having spent my final moments hearing the tiny perpetrator skedaddle away.

Killer dolls are ridiculous, hilarious, absurd things that we know aren't really scary, and yet somehow are often terrifying. Perhaps it's simply a matter of the uncanny; they're inanimate objects that look like miniature, twisted versions of us, and they're running around with murderous intent. That's undoubtedly enough to induce a serious case of the willies, even if rationally we know we could just, like, kick the thing across the room. There have been dozens of these diminutive devils poking, prodding, and pushing people to their deaths over the years, but somehow the one who looms largest (you know, relatively speaking) in the public consciousness is the one who literally doesn't do anything: Annabelle.

I'll admit, it took me a long time to come around to the breakout star of *The Conjuring* films. As I said, I want dolls up on their teeny-weeny feet doing deadly deeds! Annabelle, meanwhile, sits motionless upon her throne, looking unkempt and staring off into space, all pasty and hollow-eyed. If I wanted to watch

that for hours at a time, I could plant myself in front of a mirror!

In the 2014 film named for this laziest of dolls, a bored, pregnant housewife named Mia places the "beautiful" Annabelle on a shelf full of other dolls and exclaims, "She fits right in!" And there, dear reader, is the detail that pitter-pattered around in my mind until I found myself falling for Annabelle herself: she doesn't fit in on that shelf *at all*. She practically *galumphs* down in the middle of a gaggle of dainty, pretty, hoity-toity dollies and takes up far more than her share of the space. She sticks out like a decidedly un-beautiful sore thumb...and yet who is it that the film is named for? Who is it that everyone ends up obsessed with for decades? Who gets to sit around and do absolutely nothing while vaguely frightening things sort of happen around her maybe? *Who is she?* Annabelle, that's who.

And so, I realized that perhaps Annabelle should be admired for living her life on the margins, as it were, boldly defying beauty standards and sitting perfectly still to the beat of her own drum. Should we not all aspire to taste of such freedom from the norms?

However, in the near decade since she led the revolution against the confines of culture (too much?), Annabelle's come into her own. Perhaps it was the fact that in her third film, *Annabelle Comes Home*, she sat all queenlike in a glass box whilst her fellow denizens of the Warren Occult Museum engaged in mildly evil hijinks on her behalf. Recently, it was announced that Annabelle would be joining the lineup of Monster High dolls, and she is barely recognizable! She's been made over and yassified and, at last, she truly does fit right in. While I believe in a killer doll's right to self-expression in whatever manner she chooses, I can't help but wonder what this change in her outward appearance may mean for her future endeavours. Why, she may even get her ass up out of that rocking chair and have me falling, full heart-eyed, in love all over again. 💕



SALES *from the* CRYPT



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DEAD ON
ARRIVAL

REVIEWS BY JESSICA BUCK, ALEX DELLER, AARON VON LUPTON,
AND JEFF SZPIRGAS



THE MONSTER SQUAD

SOUNDTRACK

Bruce Broughton

TERROR VISION

The good people at Terror Vision have unearthed a new “definitive edition” of *The Monster Squad* score on three LPs, following earlier Mondo and Intrada releases. Given that Fred Dekker’s 1987 cult classic was a throwback to the Universal creatures of the ‘30s and ‘40s, composer Bruce Broughton takes influence from older tropes of Hollywood scoring. At the time, Broughton was riding a wave of genre scores, including projects like *Harry and the Hendersons*, which made him an adept choice to harness old school menace yet still keep things light enough for young audiences. For the most part, Broughton plays it straight, heightening the drama and keeping the focus aimed at scares, and letting the comedy play over it. As such, his score helps to amp up the movie and make the monstrous dangers feel all the more plausible. And yes, the second record rounds up with the “Monster Squad Rap.” You’re welcome. ☠☠☠½ JS



THE WHITE PEOPLE

SPOKEN WORD

Arthur Machen/Laurence R. Harvey/Chris Bozzone

CADABRA RECORDS

Cadabra Records had its work cut out for it when the spoken word weird fiction label took on Arthur Machen’s *The White People*. Not only did Lovecraft consider the 1899 story to be

the second-greatest weird tale of all time, but its basic plot is so bizarre, many readers have failed to understand it. Nonetheless, Cadabra workhouse Laurence R. Harvey (*Human Centipede 2*) delivers a sturdy performance, despite the story being written from the perspective of a young girl being seduced into a witch-cult. Meanwhile, another Cadabra staple, Chris Bozzone, composes one of his best scores to date, beginning with a slithering acoustic guitar theme then journeying through synth pulses, and eventually even electric guitar. Like the prose within the story itself, Bozzone’s score is hypnotic, evocative of Machen’s dark and complex world. Fortunately, this nice 2XLP set contains the full performance on disc one, with the isolated score on sides C/D. ☠☠☠ AVL



A GENTLEMAN FROM MEXICO

SPOKEN WORD

Mark Samuels/Chris Bozzone

CADABRA RECORDS

Mark Samuels has been one of the more prolific modern writers of weird tales, and *A Gentleman from Mexico* marks his best-known story – if only because it’s been printed in so many different collections. A bit of meta-fiction, the story revolves around fictional characters who exist in a world where the weird fiction genre as we know it exists; for example, a Mexican man who may or may not be the reincarnation of H.P. Lovecraft. With Samuels as narrator, a bit more character is added to the performance, creating some pretty funny exchanges between a Londoner and a Latino over booze and marijuana. Composer Chris Bozzone uses acoustic guitar plucking for the real-world desert-type setting, and swirling, building synthesizers to represent the Lovecraftian forces that envelop it all. Cadabra’s turquoise

marble LP is a good opportunity to introduce yourself to one of the top names currently working in an arcane genre. ☠☠☠ AVL



MIDNIGHT SYNDICATE

INSTRUMENTAL

The Brimstone Club

ENTITY PRODUCTIONS

Cleveland-based neoclassical duo Midnight Syndicate has been busy creating soundtracks for movies – both those onscreen and the ones in their heads – for years. The group’s latest, *The Brimstone Club*, does a decent job of providing a musical underscore that’s built around a faux nightclub, inspired by the 19th-century Cabaret de L’Enfer in Paris. There’s fun to be had piecing together the environment through the cues and their titles. Though reliant on synth samples, the sound palette aims for orchestral over electronic. In addition to string patches, the title track incorporates bells and organ for a funeral tinge, while “Vodou” mixes things up by adding ethnic percussion

flourishes and resonant chanting (the accompanying ticket with the album invites you to the titular club over five continents). The sixteen tracks move swiftly over the album’s brief 33 minutes and, given Midnight Syndicate’s aptitude for scoring various theme parks’ horror nights, *The Brimstone Club* makes solid use of the band’s talents. ☠☠☠½ JS



METRO RIDERS

ELECTRONIC

Lost in Reality

POSSIBLE MOTIVE

Stockholm’s Henrik Stelzer has long seen the virtue in antiquated analog equipment and continues to employ a multitude of retro synths to capture the bygone era of electronic music in his outfit Metro Riders – making use of reel-to-reel tapes rather than digital technology, and influenced by the usual suspects (Carpenter, et al.). But his latest opus relies less on aural menace and instead wears a Tangerine Dream influence on its sleeve, complete with wavering synths and

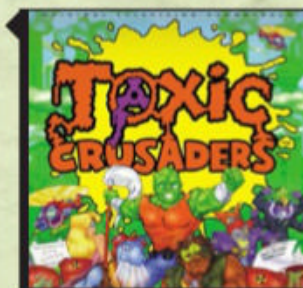
TOXIC CRUSADERS

SOUNDTRACK

Dennis C. Brown

TERROR VISION

There are delights to be had within the throwback animated scores for *Toxic Crusaders*, Tro-ma’s early ‘90s attempt to rebrand *The Toxic Avenger* for a younger set. First and foremost is the infectious theme song, with its catchy refrain, guitar licks, and Sammy Hagar-styled vocal crooning (“I had no friends, no girls would hug me till I got radioactive ugly”) – courtesy of Brown and TV juggernaut Chuck Lorre (who also penned the *TMNT* theme). It’s easily the standout track, but that’s not to diminish the balance of the underscore, which is an agreeable series of stings, jingles, and gleeful noise, including Brown noodling around on his guitar. You’ve got accordion riffs one moment, xylophone runs the next. If you grew up with this on TV, you’re likely to bask in the radioactive retro ambiance, although the scattershot nature of the cues makes it a more challenging long-play listen. ☠☠☠ JS





PODCASTS FROM BEYOND

HORROR FOR THE HOLIDAYS

THEME: Holiday Horror Movies

FORMAT: Discussion

FREQUENCY: Bi-Weekly

The holidays are drawing near, and as horror fans you're probably wondering which festive slasher makes the perfect backdrop for decking your halls. And like most of us, you'll probably consider the same overplayed handful of titles. Luckily, Santa's elves Jay Logsdon and Jeff Searcy have done some heavy research on the topic of holiday horror and have not only tracked down over 200 films with a yuletide slant but wrapped them up in a lively podcast called *Horror for the Holidays*.



Every two weeks, these ardent reviewers gather by the hearth (occasionally with a visiting guest) for about 45 minutes to unwrap a scary Christmas-themed film, though slight detours are made to include other holiday classics such as *My Bloody Valentine* and *Halloween*. Listeners can expect to hear about fan favourites *Black Christmas*, *Silent Night*, *Deadly Night*, *Christmas Evil*, and *Terror Train*, but also have their eyes opened to a wealth of lesser-known (and more bonkers) pieces, old and new, such as *Barricade*, *To All a Good Night*, *Christmas Twister*, *The Wolf of Snow Hollow*, *Mother Krampus*, and — a spoof on sappy Hallmark fare — *Letters to Satan Claus*. Preferring the roles of amused enthusiasts rather than Scrooge-y gatekeepers, Logsdon and Searcy find something to enjoy, or at least laugh at, in each film covered. They also do their research and come prepared with a sleigh full of interesting factoids about the production and the actors involved. Purists beware: the bulk of each episode is spent walking through the plot, so spoilers abound.

Horror for the Holidays is best viewed as a highlight reel of a given film's best, worst, and most ridiculous aspects, helping listeners to curate their own lists of movies to watch, to avoid, and to save for special occasions. Ever on theme, Logsdon and Searcy dissect the film's minutiae via segments called "Christmas Carols" (their favourite quotes), "Broken Bulb/Brilliant Bulb" (parts they'd fix vs. stuff they loved), and "Naughty List" (rating how prolific the killer is). Each film is then rated as "Ho Ho Hilarious," "Seasonally Scary," or "Yule Be Sorry."

Choosing a super niche topic can often spell early death for podcasts, but *Horror for the Holidays* has managed to jingle along since July 2022 and has already built a solid library with the promise of many more installments to enjoy year-round. Even the most fervent of horror fans has likely not seen, or even heard of, all of these films. Consider this podcast your advent calendar of snow-laden scares during the holiday season. **JESSICA BUCK**

trance-like percussion. The title track, for instance, with its ebb and flow of major chord clusters, steers closer to TD's *Legend* or the more contemplative moments of *Near Dark*. Bringing to mind the ambiance of skulking through a seedy metropolis after dark, there's a real hypnotic pull to the album. If anything, *Lost in Reality* could stand to feature a bit more variation between the cues, although it does wonders to put one into a state of dreamy somnolence.

☠☠☠ JS

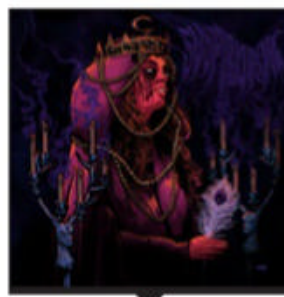


THE CREATURE PREACHERS SURF

Necro A Go-Go

(INDEPENDENT)

Riding in from the sea, The Creature Preachers' first full-length horror surf album *Necro A Go-Go* is something to get wet about. The combined musical experience of brothers Scary Gary and Greg Regular is evident in the quality of the eight songs which call to mind the Beach Boys and the *Pulp Fiction* soundtrack mixed with The Ghastly Ones, The Cramps, and even Ghost. Reading like a Tiki cocktail menu, the purely instrumental track list featuring "Trixin Death Trip," "Zombie Tsunami," and "Prawn of the Dead" manages to stay within the confines of surf, while cranking up the spooky vibes. But it's the closing piece, "El Fin Del Mundo," that reveals the group's full breadth, coming in like a western standoff and ending in funerary tones. Load this one into the boom box for your next party on Blood Beach. ☠☠☠½ JB



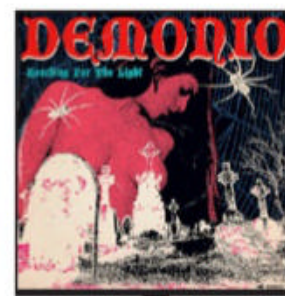
SUSPIRIORUM ROCK

Suspiriorum

(INDEPENDENT)

Named after the Argento classic and opening with a *Black Sunday* sample, this Texan act certainly knows its classic horror. As this debut EP

goes to show, *Suspiriorum* is also adept at pairing this creepy sound with deft and dynamic classic rock — a combination that mightn't be rare, but is rarely done this well. Opener "Regina Di Sanguine" is hymnal and grandiose, with Suzy Colca's vocals soaring amid lofty crashes and basslines that grope toward you like cold, pale hands. "Mother Suspiriorum" tips a nod to Luca Guadagnino's 2018 *Suspiria* remake and blends breathy whispers with a jaunty pace, while "The Dark Knows" boasts the kind of big, ballsy riff that could have once belonged to Led Zep, Torche, or Rage Against the Machine. The only misstep comes with the CD-only bonus track — a serviceable if unadventurous Blue Öyster Cult cover that sits uneasily next to the band's own material. ☠☠☠½ AD



DEMONIO ROCK

Reaching for the Light

HELTER SKELTER PRODUCTIONS

Returning to the bathtub blotter acid for a second album, *Demonio* doses us with a brand of retro rock that exists somewhere between The Heads' heavy-lidded perma-jam and the occult swagger of Electric Wizard. While the gaudy cover art (gravestones! spiders! boobies!) might suggest something permanently swaddled in darkness, the band instead concocts a blurred mix of stoner-garage-psych rock through which gauzy red, purple, and blue lights filter in, as though we're still at the freewheeling hippie dance party just before the masked attacker strikes. The slurred, echoey vocals and spiraling solos are certainly easy to steep yourself in, but at the same time one wishes the frenzied hack-and-slash would appear sooner and, thereafter, far more frequently. Instead, it's all just rather pleasant, and what's the point of that? After all, if drug-fuelled satanic orgies were pedestrian, our parents would never have had anything to worry about.

☠☠☠½ AD



CHILD of the CORN REBORN

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE WE'RE COMING UP ON THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THAT UNIQUE AND CREEPY STEPHEN KING ADAPTATION *CHILDREN OF THE CORN*.

If you've ever wondered what Courtney Gains, the actor who played Isaac's murderous sidekick Malachai, has been up to for the past four decades, he's been making music with the likes of Slash, Kiss veteran Bruce Kulick, and Greg Hetson of Bad Religion, among others. While he's kept a foot planted firmly in show business over the years (including 2015's *The Funhouse Massacre*, 2019's *Candy Corn*, and several voice-acting gigs for video games), Gains' latest output is musical: a six-track solo EP titled *Safe Haven*, out now from Fake Fangs Records. Bluesy and folk-informed, the album serves as an expression of the actor cum musician's commentary on the plagues of the modern world.

"Take the song 'Big Brother,' the chorus says it all," Gains tells *Rue Morgue*. "Who knew that we would become our own Big Brother with everybody filming everything on our phones everywhere? Then there's 'Bills in Space,' which is about the billionaire space race, which I think is just a sort of ridiculous ego trip."

Gains' music career took off in 1998 when Future Farmer Recordings put out a compilation record titled *Inbred: Sounds of the San Joaquin Valley* that included Gains' track "Journeyman," where he's accompanied by some serious rock royalty.

"At the time, my girlfriend and [Guns N' Roses drummer] Matt Sorum's girlfriend were best friends," Gains recounts. "So, I met Matt and when he heard me play, he was like, 'Hey man, I like your voice. You want to record something?' I knew the song I wanted to do was 'Journeyman,' and so I put a band together and we went up to his home studio, and while it came out great, it did need a really good lead guitar.

I got lucky when Matt, who was producing, asked Slash to play lead on it. It was a once-in-a-lifetime moment."

"Journeyman" saw extensive college radio play, leading to the independent release of his own album, *Gains: Recordings From 1988-1999*. That same year, he formed the band Ripple Street, playing guitar and vocals with special guest appearances by punk legend Derek O'Brien (Social Distortion) covering on drums, and Hetson on guitars.

"My friend Mike Dalager claimed the sound of the band was 'cruise grunge,'" says Gains. "It was kind of like '90s grunge but a little more slowed down. He said, 'I always like driving my car, listening to this stuff.'"

Dalager became part of the Gains project that will be of most interest to horror fans: an epic metal rock opera called *Dreams in the Witch House*, based on H.P. Lovecraft's 1932 short story. Released in 2013 on Platform Studio, the sixteen-track double LP featured Kulick and Doug Blair from W.A.S.P., among others.

"[Dalager] is trying to spin it off into a movie now, which I really hope happens because I would love to do the movie," says Gains. "I think it would be just a fantastic, long music video. It was great to get to be in the studio and watch

them work, just to see what it's like, how prepared they come in, how professional they are. You could apply the same thing to acting. Come in, know your lines, be ready to go."

The only way to get a copy of *Safe Haven* is through the label at fakefangs.com, as it will not be streaming through Spotify or the usual suspects, but Gains is planning a tour and might even appear at a *Children of the Corn* 40th anniversary screening or two. So, keep an eye out for the man with the red beard. But stay out of Gatlin. There ain't nothing in Gatlin. 🍷



PLAY DEAD



NOW PLAYING > EL PASO, ELSEWHERE, AFTERDREAM



EL PASO, ELSEWHERE

PC, PS4, Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X
Strange Scaffold

Breakups are a bitch, and doubly so when your ex-girlfriend is Draculae, Lord of the Vampires, and she's going to destroy the world unless you stop her. And by "stop her," we mean shoot and stake your way through floor after floor of vampires, werewolves, evil puppets, demented angelic beings, and even harder things to kill.

Players take on the role of folklore researcher James Savage as he navigates through an El Paso motel where reality is bending and fraying at the hands of his ex. As Savage descends deeper into the building – moving through floors with chapter titles such as Graveyard Shift, Ouroboros, Break Shit, and Burning Desire – more is revealed about the pair's relationship and Savage's desire to "live good" rather than simply

"die good."

El Paso, Elsewhere bills itself as a neo-noir "third person love letter to classic shooters," and it's an apt description; it's also damn fun. The shooting and staking mechanic is extremely satisfying, as is the rechargeable slow-mo perk, which proves essential in later levels when faced with mobs of various beasties, all best disposed of with different guns. While the kills are mostly bloodless, it doesn't detract from the fights, and the werewolves are still plenty startling when they seemingly pounce out of nowhere.

The level graphics are well-suited to the style of gameplay and are most impressive in the areas where reality is the most warped. The cutscenes are murkier and more stylized, with Savage's facial features limited to shapes and shadows. The version of *El Paso* we reviewed (in the week before release) did suffer from some glitches, which tended to crop up after dying at the hands of a monster mob and being respawned. Often, the only way forward following



a glitch was to reload to the last checkpoint or to the beginning of the level and do the whole fight again.

Still, if you enjoy shooters and monsters are your favourite prey, a pitstop in *El Paso* is definitely worthwhile. Come for the carnage, stay for the weird.

MONICA S. KUEBLER



HEADSHOTS: LOTS OF OPTIONS TO CUSTOMIZE GAMEPLAY DIFFICULTY; ORIGINAL HIP HOP SOUNDTRACK
MISFIRES: GLITCHES DURING COMPLEX FIGHTS; SAVAGE'S STRANGE NEARLY FEATURELESS FACE



AFTERDREAM

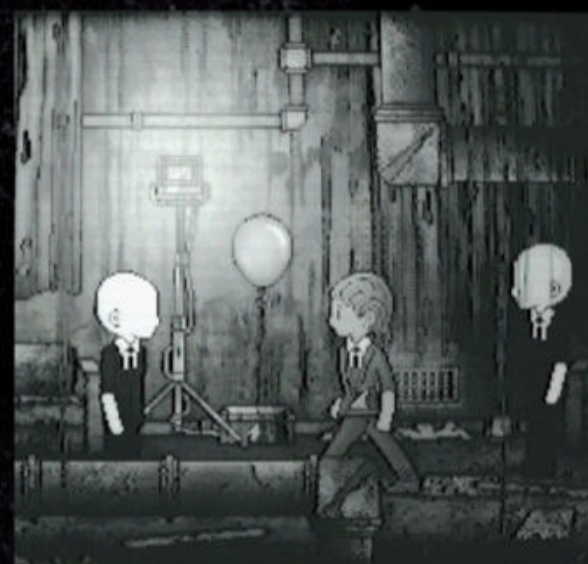
Xbox Series S/X, PC, Nintendo Switch, PS5
Feardemic

The dream of the spooky '90s-early 2000s is alive in the world of indie horror gaming, as titans of the PlayStation 2 golden age continue to influence developers both large and small. One-man developer Jesse Makkonen is no exception, taking a dash of *Silent Hill* and a heap of *Fatal Frame* to make *Afterdream*, a 2D pixel art puzzler that explores the world of lucid dreaming.

In *Afterdream's* portmanteau story, player character Jennifer talks with a therapist about weird dreams she's been having lately – if they are, in fact, dreams at all. If it feels real, does that mean it is real? A terrifying thought, given the situations Jennifer describes. Waking up in a filthy, decrepit apartment building, players are

tasked with finding a way out by solving puzzles and locating objects with the help of a special spectral camera, which can reveal clues and items invisible to the naked eye. All the while, we're wondering where this journey will lead, what it's all about, and whether or not we're even still alive.

Each episode (or "world," as game achievements call them) runs about twenty minutes; all told, one can finish *Afterdream* in an afternoon. While this means the game doesn't wear out its welcome, it also means it's over in a blink. The puzzles aren't going to tax your brain very much, but you'll occasionally encounter a hiccup where you find yourself searching high and low for the item you know you need, or scouring the environment for an obscure clue. These moments are made less painful thanks to easy navigation, with each area consisting of a couple of rooms at most.



While *Afterdream* boasts gorgeous, moody art, environments, and music, it doesn't take long for the horror to take a backseat as the vibes become more heartwarming than heartstopping. But fans of games like *Lone Survivor* and *Claire* will still find plenty to love in this weird little world.

STACIE PONDER



HEADSHOTS: STUNNING ART AND ATMOSPHERE, MINIMAL BACKTRACKING, NO COMBAT (IF THAT'S YOUR THING)
MISFIRES: HORROR VIBES FADE AWAY TOO MUCH, NO COMBAT (IF THAT'S YOUR THING)

HORROR CULTURE



HORROR AND TRUE CRIME MAY BE APPLES AND ORANGES, BUT DO THEY BELONG IN THE SAME BOWL? TWO OF OUR WRITERS ENTER THE RING TO BATTLE IT OUT!

DO HORROR AND TRUE CRIME SCRATCH THE SAME ITCH?

YES!

BENOIT BLACK

"Horror is about crime and crime is about horror. Adding the word 'true' into the equation is just a matter of personal taste."

DOES A BANANA AND A BANANA PEEL GO TOGETHER? DO CRIMINALS AND JAIL? STINK AND SHIT? HELL YEAH! AND SO DOES HORROR AND CRIME, especially when it's true! Ever since humans mastered the use of their vocal chords, they have expressed and sought out tales of fear around the campfire. And those tales, so far as any of them could surmise, were always true. Now, it's not really important if those stories did or did not actually happen in real life, our bison-fed ancestors thought they did, and that's all that matters. By the time they were able to project moving pictures onto a screen, our forefathers had become veterans at truth telling, because cinema and even fiction – if you will allow a philosophical indulgence – are just mirrors of the truth.

It happens that horror is a lot of fun, but it's also trauma – the trauma of seeing people die or get hurt, for example. It may be an uncomfortable truth (certainly for those who would never read this magazine), but truth is nothing if not uncomfortable. You may be apt to disagree if you are watching some classic Universal Monster movie from days of yore, but that completely misses the point – we've just gotten better at making horror movies; people at the time were traumatized by the Universal Monsters, that's what made them classic in the first place.

So it comes as no surprise that genre novelists and writers mine real life for their stories, certainly because there is so much to mine. Truth is always darker than fiction, and if you want your fiction dark you know where to go for inspiration. Trying to split hairs on this topic is just a game where everybody gets to move the goalposts to where they feel most comfortable.

The bottom line is that horror is about crime and crime is about horror. Adding the word "true" into the equation is just a matter of personal taste. That horrors abound in history and some unfortunates had to actually suffer through them doesn't take away from the fact that we can tell the story around the campfire. So stay sick, sickos, and scratch that itch whatever way you damn well want! 🖤

NO!

LOUIS FLETCHER

"We can rest easy in the fact that Leatherface and his comrades are overcome at the end of story – or at the very least remain confined to a work of fiction."

A CRIMINAL ACCUSATION, YOUR HONOUR! HORROR HAS ALWAYS BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH MAKE-BELIEVE AND THE FANTASTIQUE. On this basis alone, it is more natural to consider true crime as the antithesis of our beloved genre. Yes, horror has a long tradition of taking inspiration from real-world events (art imitates life, after all), but sit a science fiction nut down in front of a documentary on the Mars rovers instead of Kubrick's *2001*, and they will inevitably have a very different experience to watching HAL go full sociopath.

Some crimes contain aspects that tickle our morbid fancy, yet most don't. True-crime podcasts enjoy sizable mainstream audiences, but only a small portion of their content interests the horror fan: audacious heists, complex frauds, and even most workaday murders simply don't feature the necessary kernel of nightmare. There must be an innate element of horror with a capital H, something that inspires reinterpretation as a work of art in the genre.

For instance, Ed Gein may be the spectre looming behind *Psycho* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, but neither attempts anything like a factual account of the Plainfield cannibal. Instead, they respond to and accentuate elements of the case that have horror potential – the taboo of incest and necrophilia shared with Norman Bates, Gein's perception of humans as meat that consumes Leatherface – and adapt them into the service of a horror narrative, replete with the genre's particular conventions. They are not simply transcriptions of the police files.

Crucially too, we can rest easy in the fact that Leatherface and his comrades are overcome at the end of the story – or at the very least remain confined to a work of fiction. True-crime accounts of Ed Gein and other real-life ghouls are rarely as tidy or comforting, reminding us that there are real-world beings worthy of our terror. To paraphrase the late, always erudite Wes Craven, one might say that true crime creates fear, but horror releases it. 🖤



LAST ISSUE'S WINNER AS VOTED BY YOU ON FACEBOOK

IS THE MINISERIES FORMAT SUPERIOR TO
FEATURE FILMS FOR ADAPTING HORROR?

YES

74%

26%

NO

THE MINISERIES FORMAT IS SUPERIOR TO FEATURE FILMS
FOR ADAPTING HORROR

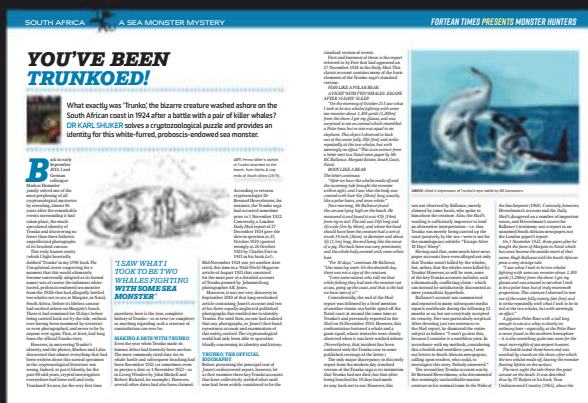


TIME TO TOP UP THE MONSTER METER?



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